Cutting to the Root: Buddhist Sacrifice, the Gcod Ritual, and Expressions of Orthodoxy

by

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When one observes the diverse spectrum of Buddhist ritual activities the practice of gcod stands out dramatically. One reason this ritual is so conspicuous is because it contains an abundance of terrifying sacrificial imagery. Describing gcod presents scholars with a multitude of fascinating and complex issues and yet, in general, only two typologies have been used to classify gcod. One describes the practice as a form of sacrificial ritual, providing little to no qualification or clarification as to the implications of such a characterization. The other approach tends to classify the practice as an activity with strictly soteriological aims, with little to no qualification of the ritual performance. I argue in the following thesis that by doing the work of theorizing gcod as a type of religious sacrifice we will be able to see how the authors of Buddhist tradition have historically and contemporaneously dealt with the problem of sacrifice.

Throughout this paper I will consider three different dimensions of the gcod ritual, each of which has its own distinct place within the practice; its role as a type of applied soteriology, the foundations of its ritual structure, and for its apotropaic functionality. Gcod practice must be understood through human interaction and social function. One must consider gcod as a performative ritual and a philosophical discipline and these different yet complementary aspects of the practice can be clearly formulated and analyzed under the rubric of Buddhist sacrifice. To do this, it is crucial to examine how the Buddhist tradition has negotiated its relationship to sacrifice to see how gcod could come to be and gain widespread acceptance in Tibetan Buddhism. As such the central question of this thesis will be, what allows gcod to function within a normative Buddhist framework of doctrine and praxis? I will argue that gcod operates as an internalized sacrificial practice, allowing adherents to assert an orthodox standard in opposition to antinomian activities, which those within the tradition have deemed irreconcilable to normative Buddhist practice.

Contents

Introduction

The Tibetan Buddhist ritual practice of *Gcod*, "severance," can be defined many ways. Janet Gyatso writes simply that it is "a traditional meditative technique for cutting attachment to ego" and "involves both the practice of specialized *sādhanas* (visualization meditations) and a general lifestyle."[1] Jérôme Edou, following 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul says, "Chöd is considered a set of meditation methods and a gradual path to put the Prajñāpāramitā into practice."[2] Taking a psychological approach, Michael R. Sheehy defines gcod as, "the amalgam of methods employed by Buddhist traditions to overturn tendencies of reactivity and fixity, and to cultivate a more pliable mind."[3] All of these definitions are acceptable but they do not describe the full breadth of the practice, which Sheehy rightly describes as an amalgam.

To properly describe the ritual of gcod we must consider three complementary yet distinct dimensions. Gcod must be analyzed as an applied soteriology, on the basis of its ritual structure, and for its apotropaic functionality. As a discipline designed to apply the soteriological principles of Mahāyāna Buddhism, gcod is a visualization practice for cutting the root of ignorance, which is the constructed illusion of an independent self. In the same vein, the ritual serves to cut away all the associate manifestations of this self, which, in the visualization, appear as various demonic forms. Structurally,

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[1] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 320.
[2] Jérôme Edou, *Ma-gcig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 37.
[3] Michael R. Sheehy, "Severing the Source of Fear: Contemplative Dynamics of the Tibetan Buddhist Gcod Tradition," *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, 1 (2005), 38.

gcod is a ritual of self-sacrifice, the aim of which is to invest practitioners with a visceral sense of the gift-of-the-body ritual, a radical display of selfless generosity depicted in Buddhist lore and certain historical accounts. The ritual has been rationalized over centuries to ensure that this sacrifice is strictly internalized, but this is a major source of tension within the tradition. Apotropaically, gcod functions as a ritual of appeasement. In this case gcod is used when external demonic forces are threatening a person or community. This final dimension of the ritual is not readily condoned within gcod texts and causes confusion over when and how the external and internal worlds of the ritual bleed into one another.

To successfully perform the ritual, the *gcod-pa*, "practitioner of gcod," is instructed to find a desolate and terrifying place in the wilderness (*gnyan-sa*). Charnel grounds and sky burial fields are commonly viewed as preferred locales in which to make the visualized sacrifice of one's own body to a host of guests called forth by the sound of the human thighbone trumpet. Once the site has been found the practitioner gathers and arranges his instruments: a small tent, just large enough to cover a body in seated meditation, an animal skin rug (ideally the pelt of a snow leopard or other wild cat), a scepter (*rdo-rje*), a double sided drum (preferably made from human cranial bones), a bell, and a human thighbone trumpet (*kang-gling*). The gcod-pa first performs the three types of subjugation.[4] These subjugations are the means to control the ritual environment and the consciousness of the performer to acquiesce to the gcod performance. Subjugation is a method for compelling all those within the environs of the ritual to acquiesce to its demands. Following these subjugations, the gcod-pa will enact

[4] These being of the self, the place of practice, and the gods and demons. These "subjugations" may take place multiple times throughout the preparation and initiation of the ritual.

a routinized series of preliminary rituals.[5] At this stage of preparation the various guests are called to come forward and join the performer in the rite.

Alexandra David-Neel, the noted explorer and amateur anthropologist, gave the following poetic description of the gcod-pa's call as she witnessed his performance in a remote sky-burial ground (*dur-khrod*).

> Come hungry ones and you that ungratified desires torment!
> In this banquet offered by my compassion, my flesh will transform itself into the very object of your craving.
> Here, I give you fertile fields, green forests, flowery gardens, both white and red food, clothes, healing medicines!...Eat! eat...[6]

This call brings forth the full spectrum of the host, composed of buddhas, bodhisattvas, gods, and demons. Once the guests are gathered and all the preliminaries completed, the quintessential part of the performance is initiated. Striking the thighbone trumpet three times against his left palm the gcod-pa cries out, "Don't be afraid" (*ma jig* shig), "Don't panic" (*ma ngang shig*), "Don't be very panicked" (*shin tu ma ngang shig*). At the instant the trumpet is blow the ritual is begun and the demons and various spirits are said to realize that they are bound through subjugation to participate in the rite. With this realization they experience a deep fear that the practitioner will harm them. The gcod-pa's

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[5] Taking refuge, rousing bodhicitta, offering the *maṇḍala* (here not the body offering), and guru yoga (*bla ma'i rnal 'byor*).

[6] Alexandra David-Neel, *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* (London: Butler & Tanner, 1931), 160.

proclamation is intended to assuage this anxiety, a mark of the deep compassion one must manifest in the practice.

If gcod were an exorcistic or expulsionary process, then surely these malevolent beings would have cause to tremble, however gcod is an entirely different variety of ritual discipline. The guests are brought into the ritual sphere, not be expelled, but to facilitate the self-sacrifice of the gcod-pa. This process starts when the body and mind of the gcod-pa are separated through the transference of consciousness (*'pho-ba*). The consciousness is then manifested in the form of a wrathful divinity. Completion of 'pho-ba signifies that the individual is ready to begin the main part of the ritual, involving the visualization of chopping, cooking, and offering one's own body to the assembled host.

The ritual structure of gcod is modeled on a classic tantric feast (*tshog*) ritual as well as the creation of a *maṇḍala offering* (*maṇḍal 'bul ba*). However, the imagery found in both of these ritual expressions, as depicted in the gcod rite, is unique to this particular form of praxis and the feast and body maṇḍala (*lus maṇḍala*) offering are conflated into one. To construct the maṇḍala the consciousness of the practitioner, in the form of the wrathful ḍākinī, skins and dismembers the practitioner's visualized body. The ḍākinī next arranges the various elements, skin, bone, organs, blood, pus, etc. into a massive construct signifying the sacred Mount Meru. This composition is then offered as a merit offering to all living beings. A series of feasts then ensues. The number and variety changes depending upon the tradition but all are the same in that they involve renewed dismemberments and arrangements of the practitioner's corpse. In these subsequent feast practices such as the "white offering," (*dkor-'gyed*), the body is hacked apart by the ḍākinī, placed in skull cup, and then boiled or

cooked into a divine nectar. The guests participate in whichever feast they are invited to and, in those feedings such as the "red offering," (*dmar-'gyed*) an orgy of violent, bloody consumption ensues. Hierarchically, buddhas and bodhisattvas are only offered nectar distilled as pure substance from those elements of baser matter, while lesser gods and demons receive defiled substances which they devour with rapacious abandon.

Once the practitioner's body has been offered numerous times the ritual is brought to a close, prayers are said for the appeasement of malevolent forces and thanks is given to the blessed buddhas and bodhisattvas. The visualization is dissolved and the practitioner is left to reflect on pervasive emptiness and the monumental compassion of those beings that have given their lives for the sake of others. Reminiscent of early charnel ground rituals—in which the Buddha's disciples were exhorted to look at corpses in various stages of decomposition, known as the "nine charnel ground contemplations"[7]—gcod is a bridge between the material world of physical bodies and the ontological world of self-awareness. Those who practice gcod understand our relationship—our attachment—to the body to be the most tangible example of the fundamental ignorance of the true nature of the self. By enacting the visualization of self-sacrifice one severs all bonds to the physical body and therefore realizes that all conditioned existence is empty of any inherent, abiding reality.[8]

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[7] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 148-149.

[8] This generalized account of the gcod ritual is taken predominantly from two sources. The first is 'Jigs-med Gling-pa's late eighteenth century ritual manual *The Laughter of the Ḍākinī*. Second is 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul's nineteenth century commentary on Theg-mchog Rdo-rje's manual *The Garden of All Joy*.

The gcod rite contains imagery, which is unmistakably sacrificial in nature. Yet, current scholarship has remained relatively uncommitted to clearly stating the ritual form of the gcod ritual. Some have, without formulation or explanation, named it sacrifice while others have avoid any such label and have been satisfied to examine its soteriological elements with little to no qualification of the ritual performance. I contend that theorizing gcod as a type of religious sacrifice will provide insights as to how the authors of Buddhist tradition have historically and contemporaneously dealt with the problem of sacrifice.

It would be naïve to assume that gcod is fundamentally an enactment of philosophical principles divorced from the visceral sacrificial work of severing the fleshy cord that binds consciousness to delusion. Rather the gcod practice must be understood through human interaction. One must examine how the Buddhist tradition has negotiated its relationship to sacrifice to see how gcod could come to be and gain widespread acceptance in Tibetan Buddhism. We must ask, what allows gcod to function within a normative Buddhist framework of doctrine and praxis.

The visualization ritual of gcod is fascinating to study, not because of the gruesome imagery it employs, but because that imagery is the centerpiece of a ritual practice that is widely accepted within all Tibetan Buddhist schools. This is most significant because sacrifice has served historically to divide Buddhist tradition from those religious groups, which Buddhist hegemonies (I use this term to refer to a dominant social group) have sought to reform or overturn. It is significant because even though the historical Buddha worked to subvert the dominant idiom of sacrifice as an external blood ritual and make of it a moral process to a soteriological end, the blood rite remains alive and well in the imagery

of gcod and the supposed boundaries between the internal and external world of the ritual have often appeared less than stable.

What tensions does gcod raise within the structure of Mahāyāna Buddhism? For centuries Tibetan Buddhists struggled with the antinomian rituals of the tantras, working to incorporate tantric practice into a normative Buddhist framework. Through the lens of sacrifice we will be able to articulate common themes connecting the early Buddhist hero ideal, reforms instituted by sūtra literature, gift-offering practices developed through the Mahāyāna, the place of feast practices developing out of the tantras, and the gcod traditions internalization of activities of a distinctly antinomian quality. In many respects gcod was able to accomplish what no other Buddhist practice had, it incorporated a ritual of sacrifice into the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition of Tibet. All these disparate elements feed into one another and share the common axis in sacrificial activity.

Gcod will be central to this study because it represents the culmination of centuries of debate over the proper place of sacrifice within the Tibet tradition and as ritual performance it is the perfect example of Tibetan Buddhism's impetus to internalize activities threatening the normative standards of orthodoxy. I will begin my analysis with a study of early Buddhist views on sacrifice, including gift-of-the-body practices in the Jātaka tales, condemnations of animal sacrifice in the sūtras, and the lionizing of Chinese martyrs. These examples lay the foundation for us to understand the ambivalent views on sacrifice existing in Buddhist literature. The second section of the paper will consider the spread of Buddhism and instances where orthodoxy has been asserted along the borderlands of

institutionalized Buddhism. Here I will show how sacrifice has historically been instrumental as a device to articulate orthodox Buddhist praxis in opposition to heterodox ritual performances.

Gcod highlights a collision of competing inclinations within Tibetan culture, the apotropaic approach to ritual, which can provide practical benefits through preserving natural order within the world and the soteriological aims implicit in Buddhist tradition. Sacrifice has its place within each of these trends. For the former sacrifice is a blood rite or an appeasement offering that, while not involving violence, functions externally as a curative to mundane troubles. For sacrifice to accord with Buddhist soteriology it must be rationalized.

Gcod is problematic because it stands at the margin between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, between the apotropaic and soteriological, between blood sacrifice and the moral or ontological sacrifice, the internalized performance.[9] Yet, gcod is the example of sacrifice par excellence, because it uses the model of hero's bodily gift-offering— originating in the Jātaka legends—and merges that paradigm with an internalized form of ritualism that functions to radically transform or even disrupt the ontological state of the individual without violently disrupting their existential substance. By the nineteenth century the gcod practice that emerged, represented a singularity of ritual praxis within Buddhism, the only broadly accepted (i.e. across all sectarian boundaries) form of sacrificial performance, perhaps in the entire history of the tradition, despite the fact that as it was condoned it was employed to eradicate other forms of sacrificial and apotropaic rites. Gcod is an internalized Buddhist sacrifice, which, within the workings of the religion, functions to put an end to external forms

[9] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1966), 121.

of sacrificial performance. Therefore, I will argue that to fully understand gcod, we need to theorize it as a variety of sacrificial performance. By doing this we will more fully understand how Tibetan religion has negotiated the boundaries of orthodoxy and what implications these negotiations may have for Tibetan Buddhism today.

While all major sects of Tibetan Buddhism have embraced the ritual of gcod, there exists a palpable tension, which is expressed in repeated condemnations of aberrant gcod (gcod log). The presence of an aberrant form, real or fictional, becomes a point for orthodox Buddhist institutions and religious reformers to push back against, a heretical other against which a normative standard can be articulated. The aberrant, heretical practices involve antinomian activities as seen in tantric text, which does not in and of itself make them anti-Buddhist, but for the fact that these rituals are performed externally and often serve apotropaic functions. According to my primary sources aberrant gcod involves the consumption of profane substances including human flesh, the burning of noxious offerings, and the use of prohibited objects for apotropaic performance.[10]

This thesis examines the condemnation of gcod log, which is striking because it clarifies gcod largely by defining its antithesis. Ancillary to this study is the presence of disparities between the language of ritual manuals and philosophical exegesis, which has impacted upon contemporary scholarly studies of gcod. My primary sources for this study are taken from the nineteenth century they include: 1) 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul Blo-gros Mtha'-yas' (1813-1899), commentary on Theg-mchog

[10] See translation, page 61-63.

Rdo-rje's (1798-1869) gcod sadhana, *The Garden of All Joy*;[11] 2) *Pure Nectar: A Commentary on the Root Meaning of Chöd*, is a commentarial work from the *gDams Ngag mDzod*, edited by 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul bLo-gros mTha'-yas (1813-1899 CE).[12] The commentary, which is on Āryadeva the Brahman's poem entitled *Esoteric Instructions on the Noble Perfection of Wisdom*,[13] and the root text are found in the thirteenth and fourteenth volumes of the *gDams Ngag mDzod* and fall under the heading of "Pacification and Severance" (*zhi byed, gcod*);[14] 3) Finally, the main focus of my study focuses on an excerpt from 'Jigs-bral Chos-kyi-seng-ge's (Khams-smyon) *The Dharma History of Pacifying and Severance*,[15] which is devoted to the history of aberrant gcod (*gcod-log gi lo-rgyus*).

Two characteristics of the gcod practice are beyond dispute, over the nine-hundred years of its development it has become a ubiquitous ritual, influencing every major Tibetan Buddhist sect, and there is no doubt that despite the attempts of many Tibetan intellectuals to make of it a pure soteriology, gcod preserves a tendency towards apotropaic praxis that accentuates its sacrificial aspects. Visually akin to tantra in many ways, gcod texts display a spectrum of imagery that ranges from the most rarified to the purely grotesque. The philosophical foundations of the ritual encompass the fundamental elements of the early Mahāyāna extending into the supreme esotericism of *Mahāmudrā* and *rDzogs Chen*. As such gcod, throughout its development, has, by necessity, expressed multifaceted and often conflicting currents of thought. In order for gcod to become part of the

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[11] *lus mchod sbyin gyi zin bris mdor bsdus kun dga'i skyed tshal ces bya ba bzhugs so*

[12] shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gcod kyi gzhung 'grel zag med sbrang rtsi

[13] 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag ces bya ba

[14] According to the *Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center*. Gyatso locates these texts in volume nine of the *gDams Ngag mDzod*, classified as *gzung rtsa ba* (Gyatso 1985, 326).

[15] Zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi chos 'byung rin po che'i 'phreng ba thar pa'i rgyan

associated orthopraxy of Mahāyāna Buddhism, proponents construed the ritual as a soteriological process and explained away its violent imagery as an extension of earlier, accepted gift-of-the-body sacrifices. Without this particular hermeneutic, the gcod ritual manuals could be misconstrued as transgressive treatises for performing blood sacrifice with apotropaic aims. Yet, orthodox interpretation always confronts the practical limitations of perceived efficacy and gcod, as practiced in community, shows a more fluid boundary between the soteriological and apotropaic usage. Even R.A. Stein's laconic paragraph on gcod, which verged strongly into orientalist territory, noted that the ritual, in common practice, "cures the sick."[16] If one were to take more considerable time observing gcod as it manifests in diaspora Tibetan communities the resultant picture would illustrate a complicated network of soteriological and apotropaic trends. As we examine such cases and look at the textual antecedents of the gcod practice it will become clear that theorizing gcod as a functional form of ritual sacrifice will allow us to better articulate its place within Tibetan Buddhist tradition and define its more contentious elements. The main problematic can be expressed as follows: It is true that sacrifice is anathema to Buddhist tradition and it is equally true that sacrifice—in the form of gcod—finds a place within normative Tibetan Buddhist ritual praxis.[17]

[16] R.A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 158.

[17] "Human cultural experience is…a dialogue between partial truths" (Mumford 1989, 11).

Early Buddhist Views on Sacrifice

Within Buddhism, there have been two broad paradigms of sacrifice, heroic self-sacrifice and external, heretical sacrifice. I will begin with the former, which will become obvious with some brief description. The Buddhist aversion to external apotropaic and blood sacrifice will be explained subsequently. Blood sacrifice, namely the killing of an animal or human *in corporeus* for the sake of appeasement, offering, or ransom is a strictly forbidden practice that has allowed Buddhist authorities throughout the centuries, to define their tradition through opposition. The heroic bodhisattva who sacrifices himself for the sake of others is widely accepted in mythology and in certain isolated instances in historical actuality.

The most explicit expression of hero sacrifice appears in the Jātaka tales, specifically those pertaining to what Reiko Ohnuma has termed "the gift-of-the-body." Indeed many of the historical sites of pilgrimage, detailed in classic Chinese accounts, are dedicated to the veneration of sites of bodily self-sacrifice, as performed by the Buddha in previous incarnations. One such site, which has deep resonance to this day, is Namo Buddha (*stag mo lus sbyin*), a mountain retreat just outside of Katmandu where the story of the tigress is said to have occurred (I will come to this legend presently). To illustrate the significance of the site, it is home to one of the three most significant stūpas in the

Katmandu valley, and all around the mountainside images depicting the future Buddha's noble sacrifice are displayed in graphic detail.[18]

Heroic accounts of self-sacrifice find make their way across Asia, accompanying the spread of Buddhism. They are not outliers of a bygone era but the fabric of Buddhist identity, even to the present day. In other words, despite the aversion to sacrifice Buddhist tradition has consistently articulated, sacrifice plays an important role in defining how the tradition expresses its archetypal figure, the Bodhisattva hero intent on liberating all sentient beings.

There exist a multitude of examples of heroic self-sacrifice in the Jātakas but three are cited again and again, the tale of King Śibi, the tigress, and the hare. These three fit the genre classification of the gift-of-the-body as Ohnuma has outlined. Namely they all involve the three components of "gift, body, and bodhisattva."[19] That is, the protagonist of every story is a *bodhisattva*—and in the case of Jātaka stories, a past incarnation of the historical Buddha—who gives their corporeal form, the body, as a gift for the sake of another, exemplifying the perfection of generosity.

The story of the tigress is recounted in multiple sources, most notably Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā* and Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā*. In the *Avadānakalpalatā* the parable of the tigress serves as a type of theodicy explaining the Buddha's choice to pardon two criminals, each of whom is the rebirth of one of the sons of a tigress, serving out their karmic debt as thieves. In the tale the Buddha tells of one of his

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[18] One striking image is crafted from molded cement and painted in garish colors. It depicts the young protagonist of the story cutting open his forearm, a long stream of thick red blood gushes forth while his eyes gaze serenely into the distance. Opposite this statue is another of a snarling tiger, fangs bared, which stares intently at the heroic prince.

[19] Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 50.

past lives as Satyavrata (literally, "vow of truthfulness"), the son of king Karuṇarekha. As the *Jātakamālā* tells the story, while enjoying a leisurely walk in the forest with his attendant Ajita, Satyavrata comes near the den of a starving tigress and her cubs. To his horror the prince perceives that in her desperation the mother tiger is about to eat her own cubs alive. Seeing the immense karmic weight of such an act the prince walks near the tigress and exclaims:

> Those who abandon their bodies in order to save the lives of others,
> Treating [their bodies] as if they were [mere] blades of grass—
> They have an enduring body of fame,
> Brought about by the arising of abundant merit!
> [For] this [mortal body] is intent upon death.[20]

Having spoken these words Satyavrata grabs a sharp bamboo shaft and cuts open his jugular.[21] Seeing the bleeding prince, the sign of salvation of hunger, the tigress feeds on his body. Such an act for the Buddhist tradition is the pinnacle of the perfection of generosity and expresses the great virtue of the sacrificial hero who recognizes the transience of embodied existence and feels moved by compassion at the suffering of others. As a brief aside, other versions of this story exist, including one in which the protagonist is a young monk, however the thrust of the narrative is consistent. The fable of the tigress

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[20] Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007),11.

[21] The cutting of the jugular vein comes from the *Avadānakalpalatā.* In Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā*, the prince throws himself from a cliff. On the hill above Khra-'gu bKra-shis Monastery in Namo Buddha Nepal multiple shrines are erected commemorating Satyavrata's sacrifice. To this day Buddhist pilgrims come from across the globe to pay homage before an image carved out of black stone, which depicts the prince holding a bamboo knife beside a snarling tiger.

tells one version of heroic self-sacrifice in which the bodhisattva's corporeal form is utterly destroyed in what Ohnuma describes as a peculiar act filled with "erotic imagery"[22]—namely the distinctly bodhisattvic eroticism of bodily demise coupled with absolute altruism, the self-sacrifice less a grisly self-annihilation as a rendering of gross matter into pure merit.

By contrast, in two other jātakas involving the gift-of-the-body, recompense is made for the awe-inspiring act of generosity. Śibi is described as the compulsive philanthropist whose generosity has become so utterly habituated that the *Jātakamālā* says that for him "giving had become an addiction."[23] Intoxicated with the urge to give the king devises to make an offering of his own body and is afforded the opportunity by the god Śakra who begs the king for both his eyes. With the delight the king has attendants surgically remove both his eyes from their sockets saying matter-of-factly "One must give what people ask for."[24] In this instance, the gift is immediately rewarded by the astounded god who restores the king's eyes to their proper state. Similarly, the story of the hare tells of a noble animal that gives his body to save a starving mendicant (again Śakra in disguise) by throwing his body into a fiercely burning fire. In one version of the tale, Śakra intervenes to save the hare. In another the hare dies and Śakra memorializes him by placing his image on the moon.

Moral fables portraying heroic self-sacrifice played a significant role for Tibetan Buddhists, explaining the ethical foundations for the performance of the ritual of gcod, which seeks through

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[22] Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 13.

[23] Peter Khoroche, trans., *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1989), 11.

[24] Peter Khoroche, trans., *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1989), 14.

visualization to emulate the karmic function of giving away the material body—fortifying the intentionality to relinquish one's body for the benefit of others.[25] As such, the ritual is a profound expression of the consequence of tirelessly working to develop the mind intent upon enlightenment (*bodhicitta*, *byang chub kyi sems*). Through this process one accumulates immense merit, tradition accounts Ma-gcig to have proclaimed, "It is more important to practice generosity by offering the body for seven days in a haunted place than to practice special virtue for a hundred days while staying in a monastery."[26] In other words, the efficacy of the gcod ritual is immense, efficiently repaying one's karmic debts and generating a great abundance of merit. Sarah Harding writes, "In Chöd, merit is accumulated by invoking and supplicating the manifestations of the awakened state (buddhas, and so on), and making profuse offerings to them, including one's own body."[27] What is the end goal of the development of enlightened mind and the accrual of merit? It is nothing short of the actualization of perfect and complete enlightenment. Initially one severs attachments—especially to the body—but if gcod has a teleology, it culminates in the severance of fundamental ignorance, cutting away all fabricated conceptualities of the nature of self and reality. Once the Buddha had accomplished this, he was able to offer his body as a sacrificial gift. The gcod-pa is encouraged to make his sacrifice internally.

These stories of the gift-of-the-body are consistent with the gift theories that appear in later Buddhist texts on philosophy and soteriology. Based on the Buddhist gift model, it is said that there is

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[25] Ma-gcig is quote in her autobiography as saying, "Are dharma practitioners nowadays unaware of the fact that previously the Buddha Śākyamuni actually gave away without hesitation his head, limbs, appendages, and anything that anyone desired?...I practice like this myself, so take it to heart, my disciples" (Harding 2003, 113).
[26] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 111.
[27] Ibid., 50.

no victim in an authentic self-sacrifice. Nothing is in fact given up. The bodhisattva having fully grasped the reality of selflessness gives the perfect gift—his own body—in complete recognition that no-thing is exchanged, there is no giver and no recipient. Holding to this view there can be no victim. The economy of traditional sacrifice however, necessitates a victim—willing or unwilling—a substantial entity that is offered for the sake of appeasement or in tribute.

Heretical Practices: Buddhist Responses to Blood Sacrifice

Having examined the positive model of self-sacrifice we must consider the ways in which Buddhism rejected blood sacrifice, namely the killing of an animal or human *in corporeus* for the sake of appeasement, offering, or ransom common. From the earliest sources, we see how Buddhism became defined against animal sacrifice. Numerous examples from the Nikāyas tell us that any form of sacrificial offering involving substances derived from the slaughter of living beings is strictly forbidden.

First and foremost Buddhism doctrine is ardently anti-sacrificial, condemning any rite that involves the slaughter of a living being. The *Kosalasaṃyutta* relates that when the Buddha was visiting King Pasenadi of Kosala an immense sacrifice of cattle, goats, and other livestock was arranged. Upon witnessing this display the Buddha exclaimed, "The horse sacrifice, human sacrifice…these great sacrifices, fraught with violence, do not bring great fruit."[28] Later in the same series of verses the

[28] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 171-172.

Buddha intimates that the single greatest crime of such sacrifice is the killing of living beings,[29] "When sacrifices free from violence are always offered by family custom…the great seers of right conduct attend a sacrifice like this."[30] The Buddha in his day was responding to the custom of sacrificial rites performed by brahmans and his prohibitions were emblematic of many contemporaneous renunciant traditions.[31]

Sacrificial killing stands in direct opposition to the foundational Buddhist precept of non-harming (*ahiṃsā*). *The Collection of Discourses* (*Sutta-nipāta*), is one example among many condemning any and all acts of violence, ritualized or otherwise:

> Laying aside violence in respect of all beings, both those which are still and those which move…he should not kill a living creature, nor cause to kill, nor approve of others killing.[32]

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta* the Buddha affirms his commitment to the first precept.

> Abandoning the taking of life, the ascetic Gotama dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword, scrupulous, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings.[33]

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[29] Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 366:31

[30] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 172.

[31] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 157.

[32] Ibid., 69.

[33] Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 68.

To avoid any ambiguity the *Kandaraka Sutta* directs its instruction specifically to monastic followers.

> Having thus gone forth and possessing the bhikkhus' training and way of life, abandoning the killing of living beings, he abstains from killing living beings; with rod and weapon laid aside, gentle and kindly, he abides compassionate to all living beings.[34]

In *The Book of Causation* (*Nidānavagga*) the Buddha explains how one who is habituated to harmfulness conducts himself accordingly with body, speech, and thought. Conversely, the individual habituated to harmlessness (*avihiṃsā*) performs positively by way of body, speech, and thought.[35] The dictum on non-killing is stated concisely in the *Sallekha Sutta*, where the Buddha lists a multitude of abstentions to his disciple Cunda, "Others will kill living beings; we shall abstain from killing living beings here."[36] This command is reiterated in a discourse on the three types of bodily conduct spoken in a sūtra to the Brahmins of Sālā (*Sāleyyaka Sutta*), "Here someone, abandoning the killing of living beings, abstains from killing living beings; with rod and weapon laid aside, gentle and kindly, he abides compassionate to all living beings."[37]

The explicit message of the sūtras is that any manner of killing is completely unacceptable. This position can be slightly nuanced by noting that Buddhist theories of karma accept that consequence

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[34] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 448.
[35] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 636-637.
[36] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 125.
[37] Ibid., 382.

directly corresponds to intention.[38] To put it in modern terms, karma provides for leniency in cases of manslaughter. However, there is no such thing as an unintentional ritual sacrifice. Consequently, by the laws of karma any form of animal sacrifice carries with it the weighty burden of violating the first precept of *ahiṃsā*, "non-violence." Such repercussions had the dramatic effect of nearly eliminating the practice of animal sacrifice in Indian during the period of Buddhism's efflorescence.[39] Further, during Buddhism's spread throughout Asia and importantly, into Tibet, the religion has brought with it the reform of indigenous sacrificial rituals.

Reframing Sacrifice in Early Buddhism

The Buddha reoriented the focus of sacrifice by appropriating the idiom of sacrifice and changing its meaning for the saṃgha. The reforms he instituted within the Buddhist community all demonstrate a reconstitution of sacrifice as internal disciple instead of external ritual. The various 'disciplines' of sacrifice as they were articulated in early canonical works can be broadly is expressed in four parts; sacrificial practices based on the reform of individual actions, maintaining the religious continuity of the community; sacrifice as internal versus external purification; sacrifice of cultural status through the development of humility; and sacrifice as the nullification, the sacrifice of sacrifice.

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[38] Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 130.

[39] Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 141.

In the Kūṭadanta Sutta (Discourse on the Brahmin Pointed Tooth) the Buddha "transvalues the idea of sacrifice,"[40] by placing ethical values—especially the virtue of non-harming—upon the ritual practice.[41] The Buddha outlined various practices that constitute acceptable forms of sacrifice or reimagined sacrifice as practices involving generosity. These include gifts to the saṃgha, shelter to monks and nuns, taking refuge in the Three Jewels, following the precepts, and the final and most exalted form of sacrifice, to become perfected in morality. The Buddha says that sacrifice, practiced as type of moral discipline, is "simpler, less difficult, more fruitful and more profitable than all the others. And beyond this there is no sacrifice that is greater and more perfect."[42] As such, sacrifice is envisioned as a method of moral development and consequently elevated as an efficacious model for spiritual attainment. The emphasis on sacrifice as moral perfection is paralleled by the legendary tales of the gift-of-the-body, which highlight the perfection of generosity—often seen as the first and most fundamental of the six perfections—with the ultimate form of giving, offering one's own body to those in need.

The second prohibition leading to reformed sacrifice exposes the conflict between external and internal purity, engendered by the conflict between Buddhists and the Brahmanical traditions. *The Discourse With The Brahimins* (*Brāhmaṇasaṃyutta*) found in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* shows that beyond the Buddha's condemnation of ritual violence he also believed that external rituals were insufficient for the development of dharmic purity. Instructing the Brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja to throw away his

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[40] Ibid., 179.
[41] Ibid., 179-181.
[42] Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 139-140.

sacrificial cakes—based on the view of polluting contagion—the Buddha says, "When kindling wood, Brahmin, do not imagine this external deed brings purity; For experts say no purity is gained by one who seeks it outwardly. Having given up the fire made of wood, I kindle, O bramin, the inner light alone."[43]

In the *Brāhmaṇasaṃyutta* the action centers on Sundarika Bhāradvāja graciously offering the Buddha a sacrificial cake. His act of generosity—narrated as an ingratiating display—is performed subsequent to Sundarika inquiring as to the worthiness of the Buddha's pedigree. The latter's refusal of the cake and remonstration of the bramin arises from the weight placed on social cohesiveness. Sacrifice in this instance is the sacrifice of social status contingent upon the hierarchical stratification of the *varṇas*. The defilement of one's character results from the compounded issue of caste discrimination and associated notions surrounding religious purity. This leads to the third category of sacrifice, relinquishing an inflated sense of moral superiority based on social standing for the virtue of humility.

Sundarika represents the unparalleled hubris that arises from the belief that accumulated merit depends upon the proper dispensation of offerings (i.e. by strict codified systems of ritual offerings) and is the direct consequence of caste rather than a trained response based on a deep inward sense of justice and social equality. The *Sutta-nipātta* enforces the efficacy of moral action to early Buddhist teachings, proclaiming, "Not by birth does one become an outcaste, not by birth does one become a brahmin. By (one's) action one becomes an outcaste, by (one's) action one becomes a

[43] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 263-264.

brahmin."[44] Sundarika's fault in the sacrifice of the cake was not the sacrifice itself, which the Buddha does not take issue with here, but rather the brahmin's social presumptions and elitist disposition. This theme appears in my primary Tibetan source text, which castigates heretical practitioners for their surpassing arrogance and deluded sense of moral superiority.

As we have detailed above, taking life is anathema to normative Buddhist praxis and on this basis any sacrifice involving the killing of a living creature is strictly forbidden. Blood sacrifice, which places a living victim at the center of the ritual performance is the epitome of a sacrificial rite of economical exchange. The victim is offered for the sake of appeasement or in anticipation of spiritual compensation. Buddhism's aversion to such a practice stems from the belief that the perfection of giving is only realized when the actors within the process of exchange are understood to be without any substantive ontological basis.

Other formulations of sacrifice appear subsequent to those found in the early sūtra literature as the tradition developed over time and across geographical boundaries. We will see how at various points in Buddhism's development the religion has struggled with the problem of sacrifice. However, we must first examine another issue that relates to concerns for early Buddhist communities. Considering that gift-of-the-body stories could be interpreted as advocating a type of altruistic suicide, we need to address—in brief—early Buddhist views on suicide, which are far more contentious and murky than those on other-killing and make examples of suicide within the saṃgha far more difficult to parse.

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[44] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110.

Sacrifice in China

Daoxuan, a prolific scholar and biographer of seventh century China collected a series of stories recounting the lives of various "defenders of the dharma" (*hufa*) that lived contemporaneously during the end of the Sui (581-618ce) and beginning of the Tang dynasty (618-907ce). The defenders were in essence martyrs who sought to rectify Buddhisms standing with the state. Daoxuan's account also shows us that their chosen method of religious protest was self-immolation, inspired by the tales of self-sacrifice found in *jātaka* and *avadāna* literature. Many self-immolations were partial (i.e. the burning of an arm), but still proved fatal. Other instances of self-sacrifice directly mirrored the method of suicide used by the young prince in the story of the tigress, such as the case of Shi Puji (d. 581) who threw his body from a cliff in hopes of preserving the teachings and iconography of Buddhism in China.[45]

Gift-of-the-body legends enjoyed popularity in fifth and sixth century China.[46] Of special interest to the Chinese monks who martyred themselves for the dharma were the stories of King Śibi and Prince Candraprabha.[47] The tale of Candraprabha, which appears in the twenty-second chapter of the *Divyāvadāna*, is not—for our purposes—significantly different from the story of King Śibi. The plot of the tale is the account of a king who desires so much to give that he offers his head to a greedy

[45] Brian Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone, eds., *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 242.
[46] Ibid., 240.
[47] *Liudu ji jing*

brahmin.[48] James A. Benn translates a section from Daoxuan's biography of Sui Śramaṇa Shi Dazhi (567-609) who is said to have suffered so greatly from the deterioration of the dharma under the Sui that he offered the emperor his arm as a sacrifice, demonstrating his desire to "glorify the true teaching."[49]

> Dazhi did not eat for three days. He climbed on top of a large canopied platform. He heated a piece of iron until it was red hot and used it to burn his arm, charring it all completely black. He used a knife to cut off the flesh, peeling it off so that the bones were made visible. Then he burned the bones, making them charred black as well. He wrapped them in cloth that was saturated in wax and set fire to them.[50]

Throughout this entire process we are told that Dazhi remained serene, completely detached and that he recited verses and "preached the dharma for the benefit of the crowd."[51] The account of Dazhi's sacrifice rivals the tales of the *jātakas* not only in the graphic nature of description but also the devotion shown by the performant. Dazhi and his contemporaries—who performed similar immolations—were later elevated to bodhisattva-esque status by the wider Buddhist community, "the sacrifices were sometimes conceived of as an exchange of the individual monk's body for the larger body of the saṃgha."[52] As such, the acts of the monks were spoken of as standing within the sphere of the highest virtues of the tradition. They attain the post-ethical state enjoyed by enlightened beings,

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[48] Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 26, 58, 137-138.
[49] Ibid., 247.
[50] Brian Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone, eds., *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 247.
[51] Ibid., 248.
[52] Ibid., 257.

the singular state from which perfected activity ensues, a state reserved for legend except when it is not.

The account of Dazhi, along with a handful of other pre-modern instances of self-sacrifice, disrupt the disavowal of sacrificial rites in sūtra sources. Such a paradigm *can* become normalized at periods of friction between the saṃgha and larger political forces. However, acceptance of self-sacrifice has been extremely limited in Buddhism's history and is only operative as a condoned form of praxis when the actors involved are considered, by the greater body of the community, to possess the saintly realization of the bodhisattva. Blood sacrifice, which involves the offering of a living victim for the sake of appeasement, commandment, or ransom, has been widely rejected within Buddhist scripture. This form of sacrifice was restructured and became an internal process of individual transformation.

The self-sacrifice of the Chinese martyrs as well as the Buddha's past-life actions are a form of ritual suicide, which has its own history within Buddhist literature. In cases of suicide and I would argue, self-sacrifice, the distinction must be made between condoned actions and exonerated actions. Typically, Buddhist ethical standards are based on intention.[53] The motivations that lead to a given action directly relate to all subsequent results. Positive examples of this appear in the birth stories where the bodhisattva gives the gift-of-the-body. Tales such as that of the tigress could be considered to have a positive ethic toward suicide, however considering distinctions in intentionality we see why the gift-of-the-body must be set apart from suicide or blood sacrifice. Intention is the principle factor for explaining the karmic results brought on by intentional or unintentional killing. That said, in cases

[53] "The karmic fruitfulness of a gift is not seen to depend on its usefulness to the recipient (which may be variable and unpredictable), but on the donor's state of mind when giving" (Harvey 2000, 20).

where good intentions may lead to transgressive activity, tradition establishes models of normative behavior and distinguishes whether an action is exonerated, based on the realization of the performer.

Two instances appear in sūtra literature where disciples of the Buddha take their lives and are exonerated for their actions.[54] In these cases the act of suicide is not condoned but the actors are considered beyond the confines of ethical norms. The first case is that of the monk Godhika, from the *Samyutta Nikāya*.[55] In this sūtra, Godhika, the devoted meditator who is unable to reach complete liberation, takes his own life (under the influence of Māra). *In spite* of Godhika's action, rather then *on account* it the Buddha declares:

> Having conquered the army of Death,
> Not returning to renewed existence,
> Having drawn out craving with its root,
> Godhika has attained final Nibbāna.[56]

In another account, Channa and Vakkali both kill themselves having suffered debilitating illnesses. In the case of Channa, the Buddha declares suicide to be a grave aberration but assures Śāriputra that his beloved attendant will be freed of all negative karmic consequence. In other words, extenuating circumstances cannot be used to affirm suicide or self-sacrifice amongst ordinary beings but, in special instances, offenders are given special reprieve. Further examples are found in early Buddhist literature

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[54] Damien Keown, "Suicide, Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: A Buddhist Perspective." *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1998-1999), pp. 385-405.
[55] Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 212-215.
[56] Ibid., 215.

suggesting that the precept against taking life is so inviolable that even speaking of the favorability of death as a means of compassion is seen as a violation of ethical conduct, a fact worth returning to when we examine the epistle of Yeshe 'Od.[57]

Let me restate the case. In gift-of-the-body lore we are dealing with a singularity outside normative Buddhist praxis. The self-sacrifices found in the Jātakas are literary inventions, which allude to a state of realization set apart from typical religious experience, extremes outside all normative moral boundaries that are employed to invoke in their audience senses of fear, pathos, inspiration, and faith.[58] As such, Buddhist doctrine runs into a dilemma with a practice that places a visualization of self-sacrifice at its center. Is the Buddhist tradition saying that self-sacrifice is a condoned and aspired to activity? To avoid such conclusions being drawn, acts of self-sacrifice and suicide are reserved for enlightened beings—a distinction determined by authorities within the tradition, such as in the case of the Chinese martyrs of the sixth and seventh century. The acts of Chinese martyrs are exonerated rather than condoned.

Sacrificial anomalies such as these cause an eruption in the textual harmony of Buddhist literature and their performance is either vehemently denounced or sanctified beyond the reach of ordinary practitioners (in the unique instances of gift-of-the-body sacrifice) and in such instances praised as the supreme illustration of the perfection of generosity. As we move into the heart of our study, with the role of gcod as a Buddhist sacrificial practice, it will be important to remember that

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[57] Damien Keown, "Suicide, Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: A Buddhist Perspective." *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1998-1999), pp. 402.

[58] For more see Collins' analysis of the *Vesantārā Jataka* (Collins 1998, 497-554).

both hero sacrifice and sacrifice as internalized process play a central function in aligning gcod with conventional orthopraxy.

The Spread of Buddhism & Uses of Sacrifice

Buddhist Borderlands: Establishing the Boundaries of Orthodox Praxis

Buddhism has, throughout its historical development, used rituals of sacrifice to demarcate the boundaries between orthopraxy and heteropraxy. Contemporary examples have appeared in anthropological studies focused on the spread of Buddhism in rural communities across Asia. These studies show that sacrifice is more than a matter of concern for Buddhist communities, it is a way to distinguish Buddhist orthodoxy from the indigenous traditions it supplants. Systematically religious authorities have established orthodox norms by pushing sacrifice to the margins of acceptable practice or, more severely, into the region of heterodox ritual performance. As such, the exclusion of sacrifice serves to establish orthodoxy.

Although animal sacrifice was never eradicated completely from Tibetan areas, Buddhist authorities persistently sought to remove it from religious life, consequently it was pushed to the margins in regions where Buddhist influence was strongest. Animal sacrifice has been used extensively in territories long under the sway of Tibetan Buddhist religious authorities. The Khumbo/Nawa of central Tibet have practiced various forms of animal sacrifice as rituals of appeasement, aimed at revitalizing social cohesion. Diemberger and Hazod describe one such ritual that involves the slaughter of a cock:

> [The sacrifice] recalls the ancient theme of creative dismemberment of an animal or demon embodying the land as cosmological act. These sacrifices are not periodical and are restricted to moments of great danger for somebody. The sacrifice in fact renews the relation to the ancestral clan, the mountain deity and to the deities of the territory in a very powerful way but which is in sharp contradiction with the Buddhist doctrine of compassion (*snying-rje*) towards all 'sentient beings' (*sems-can*).[59]

Diemberger and Hazod note that the Buddhist Lamas within the Khumbo tribe usually condemn sacrificial rites outwardly but allow them to continue in practice. This is typical of syncretic practices on the borderlands of Tibetan cultural areas.

Tibetan and Nepalese religious traditions place a strong emphasis on demonic forces and their impact upon peoples' lives. When a malignant demiurge threatens the lives and wellbeing of a village or of an individual one common prescription to offer a sacrifice of appeasement. Stan Mumford's study[60] of Tibetan lamas and Gurung shamans in Himalayan regions of Northern Nepal addresses the dialogical tension between an indigenous tradition, reticent to relinquish the efficacious practice of sacrifice for the internalized ritual disciplines of the Tibetan Buddhists.

According to Mumford, the banning of animal sacrifice is central to the process of Buddhicization. The most striking historical example of this comes from the eighth century Bsam-yas debates between the Bon-po regime and the Buddhist elite, the result of which was the exile or

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[59] Hildegard Diemberger, G. Hazod. 1997. Animal Sacrifices and Mountain Deities in Southern Tibet – Mythology, Rituals and Politics. In: Karmay S. & P. Sagant (Eds). Les habitants du toit du monde. Volume in Honour of Alexander Macdonald. Société d'Ethnologie, Nanterre, Paris, France. 265.

[60] Conducted between 1981-1983.

conversion of Bon-po priests and followers. The impact of the Bsam-yas debates is detailed by Mumford as follows:

> The incident at bSam-yas...appears to mark a shift toward a Buddhist regime that sought to establish a monological truth in place of views that are imprecise or unfinished. Further, the bSam-yas incident introduces the Buddhist model of ethical retribution, in which the act of ritual killing, called the "red offering," becomes a crucial offense. In Gyasumdo, Tibetans say the term "red offering" (*dmar-mchod*) and "sin" (*sdig-pa*) are interchangeable.[61]

Mumford's ethnographic account suggests that the spread of a hegemonic Buddhist religious order depended on the utter eradication of blood sacrifice. As such the Buddhist tradition spread through, what Mumford terms, a dialogical process, confronting and even antagonizing against local collectives of "shamans" whose primary mode of worship involved sacrificial blood rites. Part of this dialogic process is the use of replacement rituals, activities that stand in for indigenous ritual forms and replace violent external performances.

Mumford also suggests that Tibetan lamas have used many ritual devices to draw the rural people of Gyasumdo away from blood rites and toward performances such as gcod. There is after all a strong tradition on the ground for practicing gcod apotropaically as a rite of protection or exorcism. Even the Gyasumdo lamas that use gcod to expel demonic presences admit that such a use of the ritual

[61] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 32.

is a compromise made on the level of conventional truth, i.e. such usage contradicts the conventional wisdom of the ultimate nature of the gcod rite.[62]

Both the Gurung shamans and Tibetan lamas must, as a matter of self-preservation, respond to the perceived need to satiate or expel demonic forces at large in the world. Mumford describes the use of gcod to that end as follows: "The *gcod* severance rite is said to carry the distribution to a higher plane [than conventional sacrifice] by sharing out one's own body as *self-sacrifice*" (my emphasis).[63] Therefore, gcod is a self-sacrifice emblematic of those performed by the Buddha in his own past lives, its effects reverberating across a broader spectrum of moral consequence. A performance based on karmic reciprocation, giving away the body to those in need brings a great boon of merit to the individual who makes such a self-less act. In short, the gcod-pa become the hero of Jātaka lore, internally affecting a transformation that impacts upon her perceptions of the true nature of reality and disrupts her conventional understandings of being. Gcod practice on the level of ultimate truth is intended to sever one's bondage to the conceptual fabrication of an autonomous self.

Mumford summarizes the functionality of the rite as follows: "The severance model…can be viewed as a transmutation of an ancient complex, incorporating themes of shamanic initiation and sacrificial exchange."[64] Mumford rightly acknowledges that gcod, far from being a simple and comfortable application of basic Buddhist tenets, is a conglomeration of multivalent religious expressions, operating across the spectrum of religious experience, from sacrificial appeasement to

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[62] Ibid., 161.
[63] Ibid., 162.
[64] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 208.

ecstatic realization. The distribution to the gods and demons is a karmic exchange that works on what Mumford terms the "inner psychic reflexivity". Put another way, gcod reinvents (maybe even subverts) the common religious model of sacrifice, which manipulates the external world to improve one's condition and instead alters one's internal reality to improve the world. This is the common model of Buddhist reform we have seen dating back to the time of the historical Buddha, an appropriation and alteration of existing religious idiom to serve the soteriological purposes of the Buddhist establishment.

Gcod and other similar rites appear at the boundary between orthopraxy and heteropraxy exactly because they disrupt the comfortable norms of the Buddhist tradition. Gcod uses the imagery of a sacrifice and allows one to manifest the pathos of self-sacrifice. Mumford presents gcod as the most 'shamanic' of all the rites the Gyasumdo lamas use to supplant the sacrificial rites of Gurung shamans.[65] I take this to mean that the imagery and effects of the gcod ritual are comparable to the imagery and effects of shamanic blood sacrifices. The gcod rite, according to Mumford, takes exorcism rites to a higher level, functioning to appease demons through the offering of the body rather than driving them away through blood sacrifice.[66] All the gruesome imagery and carnival display of the blood rite are included in its rich imaginarium and yet the ritual's efficacy is not dependent on the killing blow that would divide it irreconcilably from Buddhist tradition. What we see in studies such as Mumford's is that the articulation of orthodoxy happens at the boundaries of tradition where animal sacrifice is active and where gcod is sometimes used to replace it.

[65] Ibid., 161.
[66] Ibid., 149-163.

Scholarship East/West A Lack of Consensus in Scholarship

We have seen from Mumford's study that the gcod rite has served a definite function, providing a type of ritual practice sufficiently similar to indigenous rites of exorcism and sacrifice to be accepted by local groups that Buddhist hegemonies have encountered. Before we turn to an analysis of the literature of the gcod tradition I would like to take some time considering an aporia in contemporary studies of the gcod rite.

A consensus has not yet been arrived at as to the best way to think about the gcod ritual and a definite gap exists between analyses that focus on the soteriological and philosophical aspects of the ritual and those who examine its functionality, often through ethnography. A divided view emerges from source material within the tradition and impacts the data, which scholars and translators use to articulate the central meaning and substance of the ritual. The image of gcod that emerges from translations and academic commentaries devoted to Tibetan texts intended to explicate the 'meaning' of gcod show a decidedly soteriological interpretation of the ritual, one largely devoid of the rich visual imagery of the practice, expressing almost exclusively a series of ethical and philosophical ideas from Mahāyāna tradition. Those scholars that have analyzed the ritual through ethnographic studies tend to describe the gcod ritual as a sacrificial practice with little qualification. Taking both these approaches we are left with a theoretical disjunction, gcod is both a philosophy and a sacrificial practice, but is only spoken of as such in separate contexts and does not exist as both at the same time. This disjunction in scholarship mirrors a similar divide within the tradition, the formulation of ritual discipline being written of entirely separate from treatises on the philosophical meaning of the ritual.

My suggestion throughout this paper is of course that we need to begin thinking of gcod as sacrifice holistically. The way to do this is to reconcile the practice to its attendant philosophy, which expresses its meaning. This can be done through thinking of gcod in terms of internalized sacrifice. This is what was done by the figure of the Buddha in the early sūtras, fully internalizing the ritual so that the terminology of sacrifice may still be invoked, expressing an ideal that is all together Buddhist. As we will see in later sections the problem is that gcod has continually wrestled with its status as a strictly internal ritual practice.

Scholars and translators of gcod who rely primarily on the textual sources accentuate the philosophical and soteriological aspects of the ritual and tend to gloss the ritualistic and sacrificial elements of the practice. Consequently they tend to pick up the logic of nineteenth century Tibetan writers who worked to reform the ritual and highlight its soteriological qualities. By contrast, academics, who focus more on ethnography, have unequivocally classified gcod as a ritual sacrifice, yet here we do not see an extensive thinking through of what it means to speak of gcod under the rubric of sacrifice. Both groups garner useful insights from their perspective, however the former simplifies one of the most stirring and problematic rituals the Tibetan tradition ever created, reducing it to ethical and philosophical maxims while the latter takes sacrifice as a self-evident concept with out considering the implications of using a label that is so problematic for Buddhism. Further, ethnographic research shows that the apotropaic performances, which may be shunned or at best rationalized by orthodox interpretations of the ritual, are not easily divorced from common practice.

On the ethnographic end of the spectrum, a number of early twentieth century scholars observed that gcod has a close connection to the celebratory practice of the "Red Tiger Dance" (*stag-dmar-ch'am*), a performance of sacrificial exorcism surrounding New Year's celebrations.[67] Tucci has also observed that the experienced gcod-pa is commonly called upon when a community faces plague or other existential maladies that are presumed to be the work of malevolent spirits.

> When epidemic disease breaks out, it is the *gcod* adepts who attend to the transport of corpses to the cemetery…and to the cutting through and breaking up of the bones. Their services are called upon to protect against epidemics: if an infectious disease has broken out in a village…the exorcists perform a dance accompanied by *damaru* and *rkang gling* while reciting appropriate magical formulae.[68]

Beyond the expiation of demonic spirits, gcod-pa have often engaged in various forms of scapulimancy and other varieties of divination as well as the expulsion of malevolent spirits that may plague a person after death (*gshed* 'dur).[69] Stan Mumford, as noted above, documents the centrality of gcod in contemporary funerary rites amongst the Tibetans living in the Gurung region of Northern Nepal along the Tibetan border. The ritual process detailed by Mumford illustrates a practice that enforces ethical constructs of universal karmic indebtedness, which are purified on behalf of the deceased (on whose behalf the rite is performed), as well as a prophylactic renewal of fecundity for the people of the village

[67] Waddell 2004; Evans-Wentz 1967.
[68] Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1980), 92.
[69] Ibid.

and their lands.[70] This dual functionality of the ritual for apotropaic and soteriological purposes is clearly evident in the quotidian performance of the gcod ritual, yet are both aspects accepted within the tradition? I would argue that they are not and that gcod was envisaged by Tibetan Buddhist reformers of the nineteenth century as a solely soteriological performance intended to disrupt the ontological status of those who engage in its enactment. Yet such a degree of philosophical emphasis was placed on the ritual that a divide has resulted in contemporary characterizations of gcod.

Guiseppe Tucci's volume, *The Religions of Tibet* includes a thorough and succinct study of gcod. Tucci focuses on the dramaturgical elements of the ritual, which he interprets as a variety of trance inducing performance aimed at the "calling forth of a hallucinatory state during which gods and demons appear visibly before the meditator."[71] Tucci's understanding of ritual efficacy is of less concern here than his interpretation of the variety of ritual praxis presented by the gcod rite, for he is one of several authors to characterize gcod as a form of religious sacrifice. Given the caution which Buddhism has shown towards any manner of sacrifice it is intriguing that such a well respected academics would, without qualification, seen 'sacrifice' to be a fitting label for gcod practice. Nonetheless Tucci writes of the gcod visualization, "the meditation takes the form of a sacrifice, an offering of the body and of life, a destruction of the five constituents of the human person."[72]

Tucci's use of the terminology of sacrifice goes further than highlighting this point; it also serves for considering the divide in scholarship, which can most aptly be described as a disparity

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[70] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 205-209.
[71] Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1980), 89.
[72] Ibid., 87-88.

between ethnographic description and textual study. Tucci is well established within the former while writers like Edou, Harding, Molk, and Allione appear more consistently in the latter. By and large, ethnographic studies consider gcod a sacrificial ritual practice that variously focuses on soteriological concerns while also functioning to address more practical, if quotidian, matters of physical and psychological health, and the preservation of agricultural resources. Mumford's study is one such study consistent with this view.

Scholars grounded exclusively in philosophical source material invariably conform to an interpretation mirroring Tibetan reforms, which developed in the tenth and eleventh century and continued through the nineteenth century. These reforms aimed at controlling tantric rituals and doctrines in the attempt to eradicate blood rituals and constrain apotropaic practice. As such in meaning texts on gcod we find a highly sanitized interpretation of the ritual, consistent in its soteriological motifs. Uniformly, the nineteenth century interpretations show a bias against an apotropaic or exorcistic form of gcod and, to the extent such performances could be construed as external practices resulting in prestige or material gain, they are held to be aberrations.

In his textual study Jérôme Edou argues that the Tibetan tradition generally eschews any connection between "shamanistic rites" and the ritual of gcod. Edou's argument, that the origin point of gcod cannot be definitively traced to early indigenous Tibetan practices and is rather of symbiosis of Mahāyāna teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom blended with Tibetan tantric rituals, may or may not stand under the weight of historical analysis.

I concur with Edou, on a later point, that one must not accept a "reductionist approach," yet his own analysis of "the actual meaning" of gcod, relies overmuch on soteriological and philosophical interpretations of the practice, he does not consider that 'meaning' can be made on the basis of how the ritual is embodied and performed. Therefore, Edou's own analysis reduces gcod to a vague applied philosophy, when in fact gcod lama's on the ground in the twentieth century still disagree on what the exact meaning of the practice is.[73]

Rather than addressing the bifurcated quality of the ritual, which harmonizes the sacrificial impulse for both apotropaic and soteriological ends, Edou choses to focus his analysis solely on the textual interpretations of authors such as 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul who defined gcod as "a set of meditation methods and a gradual path to put the Prajñāpāramitā into practice."[74] What Edou omits is the fact that Kong-sprul also wrote an elaborate commentary on at least one ritual manual and himself attempted to clarify authentic gcod in opposition to aberrant activities. This suggests to me that Kong-sprul was well aware that gcod was a complicated and potentially problematic practice, one with multiple dimensions of religious expression.

The early twentieth century scholar Charles Van Tuyl, appears at the center of Edou's critique. His facile assumptions and orientalist assertions are the type that fuel many of the apologist defenses of the Tibetan view of gcod we find articulated in many contemporary works on the subject. Van Tuyl consistently referred to gcod as a sacrifice, however he also called it a "living fossil" and, drawing on

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[73] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 253.

[74] Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 39.

Eliade,[75] made the precarious comparative leap to suggest that gcod shared a common ancestral link with Inuit initiation rites.[76] Yet, as is consistently the case, for every questionable essay or book on gcod one can find another that is equally of value such as David Stott's succinct overview of the practice for the journal *Religion*. As with the other authors, Stott also characterizes gcod as a form of sacrificial performance writing, "At the heart of the practice of *gCod* is a series of contemplative enactments or visualizations of the sacrifice of the meditator's own physical form to all sentient beings, particularly those of a demonic nature."[77] On its own this statement summarizes the result of centuries of development by which the sacrificial impulse comes to be expressed in distinctly Buddhist terms. Rather than attempting to explain away embedded sacrificial elements from the ritual, Stott confirms the presence of sacrifice in its uniquely Buddhist manifestation.

In her essay, "The Great Wisdom Mother and the Gcod Tradition," Giacomella Orofino focuses broadly on "the central philosophy of the gcod school, its origins, and its theoretical premises." The piece, while giving substantial weight to the more philosophical interpretations of gcod also provides a highly substantive analysis of its ritual components, which Orofino characterizes as, "the ritual sacrifice of one's body."[78] Orofino's piece goes a great distance to bridge the divide between the philosophized history, constructed by nineteenth century Tibetan scholars, and the ritual history with its complex of responses to apotropaic, exorcistic, and funerary needs.

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[75] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Ancient Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 62-64.
[76] Charles Van Tuyl, "Mi-la ras-pa and the gCod Ritual," *The Tibet Journal* 4 (1979), 34.
[77] David Stott, "Offering the Body: The Practice of Gcod in Tibetan Buddhism," *Religion* 19 (1989), 222.
[78] Giacomella Orofino, "The Great Mother and the Gcod Tradition," David G. White, ed., *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 405.

Dan Martin's essay, "On the Cultural Ecology of Sky Burial on the Himalayan Plateau," analyzes the Tibetan origins of gcod and argues that they are psychological in nature. In a functionalist vein, Martin argues that gcod developed from a 'social need' to adjust to the necessity of sky-burial, which involves the ritual dismemberment of corpses and the feeding of the dead to vultures and wild animals. Martin characterizes the black feast as an expiational rite in which the body is "sacrificed to the spirits."[79] The black feast is central to the rite and involves calling demons to feed upon the dismembered body-parts of the practitioner as well as various bodily substances. This portion of the rite is seen as expiational in that it rids one both of the inclination to grasp to the physical form of the body and purifies the practitioner of all of her faults accumulated through wrongful thoughts, speech, and action. Martin's treatment of the rite does not attempt to explain away its sacrificial qualities, such as the impulse to cleanse or purify through ritualized eradication, rather he attempts to discern the origins of the practice. His conclusion, that gcod originated from the sociological need for Tibetans to understand or give meaning to the stark funerary rites of the sky burial, a necessity for people living largely above tree-line with a topography composed more of rock than soil. Consistent in the work of both Stott and Martin is the impeccable quality of analysis, which shows a certain pragmatism regarding ritual development, suggesting a developmental response to communal needs as much as to philosophical ideologies.

Considering recent work on gcod source material, we encounter a number of texts that hold consistently to later interpretations articulated by Tibetan authors desirous to make the ritual conform

[79] Dan Martin, "On the Cultural Ecology of Sky Burial on the Himalayan Plateau," *East and West* 46 (1996), 366.

to a distinctly philosophical and soteriological framework. Most substantive amongst these works are Sarah Harding's translation of the definitive biography of Ma-gcig as well as a commentarial treatise by Jamgon Kong-sprul. In *Ma-gcig's Complete Explanation*, Harding provides a detailed explanation of the gcod rite, its origins, and interpretations. Her descriptions are nuanced and acknowledge the complex heritage of gcod. Harding writes, "Early on, the practice of Gcod was associated with exorcism and demon suppression."[80] However, she qualifies this point by noting that Ma-gcig Lab-sgron herself did not sanction such activities. This may or may not be a verifiable assertion considering that with current historical analysis we are unable to actually distinguish the words of Ma-gcig subsequent textual amendments.[81] Given the efforts of nineteenth century Tibetan scholars, writing centuries after Ma-gcig's time, to "clarify" the meaning of gcod in strictly philosophical terms, it is no great leap to suggest such amendments may have been made to historical texts to further such arguments. The lengthy and comprehensive introduction Harding gives to her translation largely avoids any analysis of the sacrificial elements of the ritual as well as its apotropaic uses. Harding's work stands as one of the more substantive contributions to current scholarship on gcod.

David Molk, in his introduction to *Gcod in the Ganden Tradition* writes, "Gcod is nothing less than one of the most sublime expressions of Buddhadharma."[82] Elaborating on this point Molk takes a

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[80] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 44.

[81] It must be noted that Harding is currently working on a comprehensive study of writings attributed to Ma-gcig. This study, when complete, may provide us with a greater knowledge of what Ma-gcig actually said regarding the ritual and philosophical elements of gcod.

[82] David Molk, ed., *Chöd in the Ganden Tradition: The Oral Instructions of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), 27.

familiar line of exegesis, characterizing gcod as the "main path to enlightenment," and without even the slightest qualification describes it as the logical extension of the cognitive discipline of *blo-rig*, "awareness and knowledge."[83] Molk's book is first and foremost a translation of the eminent Ge-luk-pa lama, Kyabje Zong Rinpoche (1905-1983). Reading Kyabe Zong's oral instructions it becomes clear that Molk's interpretation of gcod does not derive from his own analysis of the practice but is a restatement of Kyabe Zong's presentation of gcod as the "essence of Prajnaparamita."[84]

In *Feeding Your Demons*, Lama Tsultrim Allione psychologizes the practice of gcod for a Western audience utterly divorcing it from any and all connection with prior ritual components. Allione describes her gcod as "a simple five-step practice that doesn't require any knowledge of Buddhism or of any Tibetan spiritual practices."[85] This gcod resembles less any form of religious discipline and more a rather typical self-help prescription to help one fight the "demons" of "addiction, self-hatred, perfectionism, anger, jealousy, or anything that is dragging you down, draining your energy."[86] As such Allione's should be considered more as an interpretation of gcod rather than a contribution to scholarship or translation. Yet *Feeding Your Demons* shows the extreme of Western interpretation moving away from the ritual basis of the practice.

All of these texts, by Harding, Molk, Edou, and Allione (not coincidentally all Buddhist practitioners), present an image of gcod that is strongly aligned with the philosophical viewpoint of the

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[83] Ibid., 45-47.
[84] Ibid., 55.
[85] Tsultrim Allione, *Feeding Your Demons: Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 5.
[86] Ibid.

tradition, particularly its emphasis on soteriological efficacy. Ritual manuals remain relatively obscure in English versions, mostly the product of small dharma publications. This is not to suggest intentional obscurantism but more to prove the point that the standard Tibetan narrative of the nineteenth century has continued to have substantial influence in the dialogue and we have not yet managed to find a method to bridge the disparate elements of gcod. This bridge can be found by theorizing gcod as a sacrificial practice, and such an approach will accentuate the complex and at times problematic place the ritual has held in Tibetan Buddhism.

A Foundational Problematic: Salvation and Apotropaic Efficacy in Nepal

If we look at gcod, localized within a contemporary Buddhist community, we begin to see the diverse range of soteriological and apotropaic elements that emerge from it. Lama Tsering Wangdu Rinpoche is the spiritual leader of the *gcod* monastery Dingri Langkor Jangsem Kunga Ling located in the heart of Bodha, Nepal. Lama Wangdu resides over a community of monks who perform the ritual nightly and put on regular communal performance on holidays and at particularly auspicious time in the year. Lama Wangdu himself also provides the regular service of offering divinations to the exile Tibetan community living in Bodha. Kunga Ling monastery is situated down a back alleyway several blocks from the center of the city and houses anywhere between twelve to thirty monks at one time. Wandering ascetics and spiritual seekers regularly visit the monastery to learn the quintessentially Tibetan ritual that is gcod. To perform the ritual one must first procure the required implements which include a trumpet carved from a human femur (*rkang-gling*), a ritual drum (*damaru*), a bell, and scepter

(*rdo-rjes*, *vajra*). The cobbled streets of Bodha surrounding the Great Stupa of Khāsti (Bodh-nāth) are encircled by a superabundance of shops displaying religious objects from priceless antiques to shoddy replicas with little or no ritual functionality. The one tool that is noticeably absent at such venders is the thighbone trumpet, a centerpiece of the gcod ritual drama, required for the efficacious performance. The trumpet's primary function is to call the host of demigods, spirits, and demons who act as recipients of the gcod feast.

After observing numerous gcod performances at Kunga Ling it was apparent that all the gcod-pa monks used these trumpets and any new arrivals obtained them without difficulty. I spoke to Samten, the monastery director, and requested that he take me through the steps of obtaining a ritually suitable *rkang-gling*. He obliged immediately and rang a local merchant who arrived within fifteen minutes. After a brief exchange with Samten, the merchant, whose name remained undisclosed, produced from a small black duffle bag four bleached white bones, each approximately one foot in length. The bones had been shorn several inches below the trochanter. Each femur had been hollowed and two oval holes carved into the lateral and medial epicondyles where the femur meets the tibia. Around this portion of each bone, which would be the bell of a Western style trumpet, was wrapped a piece of died red leather and a thick pale resin had been molded into the shaft of each bone to form a mouthpiece.

After inspecting each rkang-gling meticulously for any cracks or signs of deformity Samten examined the straightness of the shafts and what is referred to as the "dancing floor of the ḍākinīs," the flat surface between the epicondyles. Finally, he picked up each trumpet, smacked it against the palm

of his hand three times in succession and gave each several blows, both long and short. Finally, he picked one out and said that it had excellent sound and good structure. He spoke briefly to the merchant and then inform me that as well as being in perfect condition this particular instrument had been produced from a female bone and would be especially beneficial in the performance of the ritual.

This final detail, concerning the trumpets ritual efficacy, is of particular interest to our understanding of the tensions between soteriological and apotropaic approaches to the gcod rite. The focus given to the bone's origin and structure highlight the centrality of apotropaic functionality, which suffuse the ritual world of the gcod practitioner. In this specific instance the soundness of the ritual object is not a soteriological concern, rather such requirements are necessary for calling and binding *actual* demons for the purpose of subjugation, appeasement, or exorcism. In 1923 Berthold Laufer, the curator of anthropology for the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History wrote a overview of the use of bone ornamentation in Tibetan society. Among the artifacts he details the human thighbone trumpet appears. Regarding this item he writes,

> There are trumpets made of human thigh-bones, the bones of criminals or those who have died a violent death being preferred for this purpose. These trumpets are consecrated by the priests with elaborate incantations and ceremonies. In the course of this ritual the officiating priest bites off a portion of the bone-skin; otherwise the blast of the trumpet would not be sufficiently powerful to summon, or to terrify the demons.[87]

[87] Berthold Laufer, "The Use of Human Skulls and Bones in Tibet," *Field Museum of Chicago* (1923), 2.

Laufer does not mention the gcod ritual presumably because he knows nothing of it and no ritual manual to date has suggested that the bla-ma sanctifying the ritual object would attempt to bite at the rkang-gling. However, Laufer's likely source for this information is the anthropologist L. Austine Waddell who made similar, albeit more extensive notes on the trumpet's production.[88]

Thorough study would be required of the ritual construction of the trumpets but evidence suggests that currently these instruments are produced by merchants who follow highly specific ritual standards concerned with selection and manufacture. Laufer views the rkang-gling and other such ritual objects as "relics of an age of savagery,"[89] instruments that were a holdover of Tibet's brutal and uncivilized past prior to advent of Buddhist teachings on universal love and peace. Needless to say, studies on gcod have fortunately become more nuanced in successive generations. For our purposes the thighbone trumpet is a physical manifestation of the inherent tension between the on-the-ground necessity for rituals of appeasement and exorcism and the salvific inclination of Buddhist tradition to focus attention on metaphysical concerns.

In accordance with ritual standards the rkang-gling should be produced to exact specifications, which include material and metaphysical particulars. The trumpet is generally made from a right human femur bone, cut approximately 30cm above the knee joint so the stem length of the trumpet is around three-and-a-half hands. Two holes are then punched through the double bell of the knee joint

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[88] "These [trumpets] are sometimes encased in brass with a wide copper flanged extremity, on which are figured the three eyes and nose of a demon, the oval open extremity being the demon's mouth. In the preparation of these thigh-bone trumpets the bones of criminals or those who have died by violence are preferred, and an elaborate incantation is done, part of which consists in the Lama eating a portion of the skin of the bone, otherwise its blast would not be sufficiently powerful to summon demons (Waddell 1999, 300)."

[89] Berthold Laufer, "The Use of Human Skulls and Bones in Tibet," *Field Museum of Chicago* (1923), 10.

creating the dual apertures called the 'nostrils of the horse,' and the marrow is blown or scraped out. Particulars for a satisfactory rkang-gling include the size and shape of apertures, the flatness of the space just above the knee joint, and the width at the center of the knee joint. After removing the marrow a mouth-piece is formed from beeswax to improve sound quality and human or yak skin is at times rapped around the bone for protection. Decoration of the trumpet is often considered superfluous.[90]

The type of bone used in the trumpet is equally specific to the manner of its production. Factors such as the sex, social status, moral fortitude, and mental and physical welfare of the deceased at the moment of death are all considered. The bone of a female is preferred to that of a male and more specifically the left thighbone of a sixteen-year-old Brahmin girl. The moral character of the person from whom the bone is obtained is equally important. The most coveted trumpets are those constructed from the bones of highly realized ascetics and yogins/yoginis. Finally, the karmic state of the person from whom the bone was taken is essential for particular rites especially those of an apotropaic nature.[91] All of these factors would be considered when selecting a bone for usage by the monks of Kunga-ling, a community that practices the gcod rite as it is detailed by widely accepted authorities such as 'Jigs-med Gling-pa and 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul. If an orthodox expression of gcod truly exists these two figures are central to its articulation.

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[90] Andrea Loseries-Leick, *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra: An Ethno-history Study of Skulls, Bones, and Relics* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2008), 23.

[91] Andrea Loseries-Leick, *Tibetan Mahayoga Tantra: An Ethno-history Study of Skulls, Bones, and Relics* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2008), 77-78.

Given these factors, the problematic inherent in gcod is the conflation of apotropaic activities with what, in the view of Tibetan philosophers and scholars, is a practice of meditative discipline, aimed at transforming the ethical and ontological status of the individual practitioner. In the exegetical literature the gcod rite is often portrayed as a profound exercise in soteriological transformation while the apotropaic aspects are glossed over. There exists a level of dissonance between gcod on-the-ground as it is practiced in popular culture as a means of appeasing malevolent forces and its esoteric qualities which are the province of scholars and high lamas. As such the conflict can be seen as one of literalism (regarding the actuality of demonic forces) versus metaphorical allusion (demons as a manifestation of one's own mind).

To reconcile these issues it is important to examine how the gcod tradition conceives its history, largely on a textual basis. What are the antecedents that allow gcod to be framed as a soteriological process originating in the earliest parts of Buddhist history? How do the images and disciplines of ritual manuals complicate this idealized picture?

History of Gcod as Sacrifice

A Textual Genealogy

Janet Gyatso confirmed what had been asserted by leading thinkers in the gcod tradition for centuries; there are "ample precedents for the theory and practice of Gcod throughout Buddhism."[92] This however cannot confirm nor deny an Indian origin for the ritual. Yet, it is crucially important to consider the textual antecedents put forth by authors of gcod cycles. These literary sources stretch across the entire historical framework of Buddhism. I will focus on those sources which prominent figures from within the tradition have elevated as historically relevant. Taking stock of how the origins of the tradition are generally described will illuminate how legitimation is established. It should be noted that the first point of legitimacy is localized in the mytho-historic past of the jātakas, with the very self-sacrificial accounts described previously.

The following will show the importance of establishing a historical basis for the tradition, the need for strands that connect to legitimate antecedents in an Indic past. This need to establish legitimacy is paradigmatic of the move by nineteenth century commentators to emphasize the internal, soteriological elements of the gcod rite. Once again, the language of sacrifice proves valuable by helping us theorize the imperative to seek legitimation. This is not to say that other ritual practices

[92] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 323.

would not need to establish historical precedence only that the need is enhanced when the structural matter of one's tradition may be a source of internal religious conflict.

Gcod developed in the mid-eleventh century; a time when Tibet's religious institutions were witnessing what Davidson termed "the new orthodoxy."[93] While authorities within religious institutions focused on esoteric, philosophical, and translated works the larger Buddhist society developed a broad array of ritual practices that both flourished and created deep societal divisions. While an influx of new ideas during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries encouraged significant innovations (gcod amongst them), the intellectual tidal wave of this period also lead to a reflexive impulse from within institutional structures to encourage, or demand, a grounding for the source of tradition. To establish the authenticity of any given teaching or ritual practice one was obliged to trace the roots of that practice back to India.[94] The following provides a brief genealogy of the links between Tibetan gcod and its Indian antecedents as reported by those within the tradition.[95]

Recall that tales of offering the body are described throughout the *jātakas* (tales of the historic Buddha's past lives) and *avadānas* (legends explicating the fruition of *karma*). Such stories are referenced in commentarial literature on gcod as a basis for authentication.[96] Reiko Ohnuma, in her studies of genre, categorizes the gift of the body stories as "super-*jātakas*" since they promote a level of

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[93] Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 244-245.

[94] Ibid., 154.

[95] Harding 2007, 113 & Gyatso 1985,338-339.

[96] gLing-sphrul Padma Lung-rtogs's commentary on the *bDud-'joms gTer-gsar* describes the history of *gcod* as dating back to the early sutras when the Bodhisattva (i.e. past life birth of the historical Buddha) gave away his family, kingdom, and body. See *Nye brgyud gcod kyi khrid yig gsal bar bkod pa legs bshad bdud rtsi'i rol mtsho zhes bya ba bzhugs so*, vol. 1, p. 43.

giving which exceeds the average capacity of most individuals.[97] The visualizations and ritual praxis of gcod, which derive their narrative foundation from these early traditions, may be seen as a more practical method for simulating what would in reality be nothing less than a blood rite *par excellence*, transgressing the normative strictures of Buddhist doctrine into the territory of tantric antinomianism. When we arrive at our analysis of *gcod-log*, "aberrant gcod" it will become apparent that such concerns were alive and well up through the nineteenth century.

While gcod is ascribed an Indian origin by its later proponents, and although enthusiasts of body-donation (e.g. Śāntideva, Chinese martyrs, etc.) can easily be found, the substantive collections of source material on the gcod tradition are all contained in various Tibetan textual cycles. The only extant text, authored by an Indian master, is Āryadeva the Brahman's poem entitled *Esoteric Instructions on the Noble Perfection of Wisdom* (c. 1070-1250).[98] Āryadeva, second only to Pha-dam-pa Sangs-rgyas, is the most commonly cited source of gcod tradition from India. Those responsible for formulating the antecedents of gcod saw him as a powerful figure to authenticate the tradition and placed him at the center of almost every gcod lineage. Further, Āryadeva is the only verifiable Indian source, because even though Pha-dam-pa Sangs-rgyas is commonly credited, by Tibetan authors, with the initial formulation of the gcod rite no text explicitly referencing gcod is found in his writings and no other Indian source material has been found to date.[99]

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[97] Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 44.

[98] 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag ces bya ba

[99] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 328.

The brahman Āryadeva, distinct from Nāgārjuna's disciple of the third century, is a somewhat obscure figure of the late eleventh and early twelfth century. What is known is that he is at times referred to as the uncle of Pha Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas and his text is central to gcod doctrine.[100] Almost all that is known of him comes from Tibet. In fact he is one of the most prominent Indian figures for the legitimation of gcod ritual. Karma Chags-med cites Āryadeva as one of the four main Indian sources of the Gcod tradition, the other three being Nāropa, Padmasambhava, and Pha Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas.[101] Dam-pa and Ma-gcig Lab-sgron (the Tibetan progenitor and codifier of Gcod) are the two primary sources of all gcod lineages. The tradition commonly accepts that Ma-gcig received the tradition from Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas.[102]

There are two primary authenticating structures that apply for all gcod traditions. These are the mother (*ma-brgyud*) and father (*pha-brgyud*) lineages of gcod that show the teaching's direct line of dissemination. The latter, the father lineage is roughly historical, tracing the spread of oral instruction back to scriptural source material from India. Āryadeva figures prominently into the historical line of almost every father lineage of gcod for just this reason. Examples of the ubiquitous presence of Āryadeva appear in many gcod traditions with marked similarities. In *Machik's Complete Explanation*, Āryadeva appears in all three divisions of the father lineage.[103] Theg-mchog Rdo-rje the important

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[100] Giacomello Orofino, "The Great Wisdom Mother and the Gcod Tradition," *Tantra in Practice*, David Gordon White, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 398.

[101] Gyatso has noted that beyond the tradition's account, there is no supporting evidence for such a claim (Gyatso 1985, 325).

[102] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 328.

[103] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 98-99.

hierarch of the Karma Kam-tshang tradition includes Āryadeva within his divisions of the father lineage, two sūtra lineages, and one mantric lineage (*sngags-lugs ring-rgyud*). More recently, Āryadeva appears as part of the father lineage in Bdud-'joms Drag-sngags Gling-pa's (1871-1936) gcod cycle, *The Profound Heart Essence of the Mahasiddha Saraha.*[104] The father lineage follows a similar formula across these different teaching traditions always including: Śākyamuni Buddha, Āryadeva (the Brahmin), Pha Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas and variously including Maitreya or Mañjuśrī.

The mother lineage, the second line of transmission, is composed of non-human actors, and commonly referred to as the lineage of Secret Mantra. This strain represents a direct transmission from Vajradhāra (rDo-rje 'Chang) through Tārā (rJe-btsun sGrol-ma) to Ma-gcig herself.[105] Both the historical line of scriptural dissemination and the line of visionary transmission are seen as equally valid from the Tibetan perspective. Both fulfill the needs of those within the gcod tradition to establish an authoritative source that can connect either to divine revelation or to a historical Buddha and both trajectories arrive at an origin point that is authoritative.

As for Āryadeva's own work,[106] *Esoteric Instructions on the Noble Perfection of Wisdom,* [107] is a far cry from anything related to the gift-of-the-body and must be classified as expressing the 'meaning' of gcod. The first reference to anything being 'severed' in Āryadeva's poem occurs after an allusion to the discursive thoughts being like the branches of a tree. If the tree is cut down at the root (alluding to the

[104] Grub mchog sa ra ha pa'i snying thig zab mo gzhugs

[105] For extensive lineage diagrams see: Harding 2003, pp. 98-99 & Rinpoche 2007, pp.15-21.

[106] "'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag." In bstan 'gyur (snar thang). TBRC W22704. 118: 155 - 156.

[107] 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag ces bya ba

root of ignorance), no branch of discursive thought can grow. Āryadeva elaborates on meaning of this metaphor, preceded by a quote attributed to the great Indian Buddhist poet Saraha.

> "I prostrate to the mind, like a wish fulfilling jewel,
> The mind-as-such, which is solely the seed of everything,
> In which samsāra and nirvana emanate,
> [It] is that which gives all the fruition of aspirations."
>
> When [one has] such realization it is like cutting to the root of a tree,
> The branches of conceptual thought will never arise again.[108]

Following this highly philosophical train to its logical conclusion Āryadeva provides, some stanzas later, his concise definition of gcod as "cutting off mind at the root," (*sems nyid rtsa ba gcod*). Āryadeva's verses fit neatly into the picture of scriptural antecedents from India.[109] The poem describes the body maṇḍala (albeit in the briefest possible manner), the retreat to desolate and terrifying places, and the manifestation of demonic forms. Āryadeva's poem gives the following allusion to offering the body:

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[108] *sems nyid gcig pu gun gyi sa bon te*
gang la srid dang myan ngan 'das 'phro ba
'dod pa'i 'bras but hams cad ster byed pa
yid bzhin nor 'dra'i sems la phyag 'tshal lo ces so
de ltar rtogs na sdong po rtsad bcad bzhin
rtog pa'i yal ga nam yang skye mi 'gyur
sems kyi gzhi rtsa chod nas slar yang 'khor bar mi ldog cing

[109] Jérôme Edou connects this verse to the *Mahāmudrā Upadeśa* of Tilopa (Edou 1996, 30).

Those of average capacity should transform
their aggregates into an offering of food.
Next, generate an awareness that experiences
mind free of any reference points [or mental fabrications].

Having moved to desolate spots,
When magical displays of gods and demons arise,
Separate awareness from the material body
[through transference of consciousness].[110]

Even with these words, which correlate with some vague notion of gcod as it later developed, the language of Āryadeva's poem is vague enough to have been a common Buddhist metaphor. It is just as likely that these verses reflected Āryadeva's sense of the adamantine spiritual prowess a practitioner develops subsequent to realizing the teachings on the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*, *pha rol tu phyin pa*) as it is that they relate to an established ritual practice.

If Āryadeva's poem provides the textual antecedent for the gcod ritual, the legend of Ma-gcig's own past lives serve to legitimate the tradition's founding figure. Once again we see the importance to provide an Indic line of accent. She is said to have been born to the king of Kapila, India known as Śrīsura Ārya (Dpal bwang phyug 'phags pa). Mirroring the Buddha's life story, the legend of this past life has Ma-gcig born as a prince, named Praṇidhā Siddhi (Smon lam grub), who later renounced worldly life. At age ten the prince received ordination and took the name Don-grub Bzang-po. As fits

[110] Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 20.

hagiographical works the prince, turned monk, has a remarkable career as a scholar, debater, and defender of the faith. At the age of sixteen he is said to have gone to Bodhgayā where he successfully defeated one-hundred thousand heretics. After this heroic feat, Praṇidhā Siddhi is told by a host of deities to retreat to the Bhadra cave at Potari, in southern India. There he is met by a wrathful blue-black dakini[111] who, after telling him he must travel to Tibet, slays him with a hooked knife and carries off his consciousness to be born in the village of Lapchi as the child Sgron-tse, "little light." This extraordinary child would grow up to become one of the most influential women in all of Tibetan Buddhist history, Ma-gcig Lab-sgron.

The most significant Indian progenitor of the gcod tradition is Pha Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas, a figure Ronald Davidson refers to as "the most influential Indian yogin in late-eleventh and early-twelfth-century Tibet."[112] Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas is held up within the gcod tradition as the personal teacher of Ma-gcig and is included within every gcod lineage. Ma-gcig's autobiography asserts that she met Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas in central Tibet after studying under her teacher Bsod-nams Bla-ma. There she received various instructions and empowerments. Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas is seen by tradition to have passed the gcod practice on to Ma-gcig but historical sources tell a different story.

Janet Gyatso's seminal essay on gcod lineages suggests that Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas may in fact have never taught gcod. Gyatso writes, "As far as can be ascertained there was no text on the teachings of Gcod by Dam-pa. Moreover, the occasions on which he is explicitly said to have taught Gcod are

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[111] Most likely Khros-ma Nag-mo.

[112] Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 245.

few."[113] Further, although Davidson is willing to take the tradition's claim that Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas was Ma-gcig's primary teacher on face value textual analysis suggests the reality may have been otherwise. Based on extensive textual analysis Gyatso concludes that the verifiable connections between Ma-gcig and Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas are tenuous at best. "It is...summarily stated that he [Dam-pa] transmitted Gcod to the Tibetan yoginī Ma-gcig Lab-sgron, although in fact the histories of Gcod do not really support this."[114] Therefore it is altogether likely that the gcod ritual is a practice of Tibetan design whose adherents, when faced with the pressures applied by the demands of the new orthodoxy of the late-eleventh and early-twelfth centuries and the subsequent iterations of orthodox thought, sought Indic antecedents to add legitimacy to their ritual discipline. As a brief aside, many more instances of this reaching for 'legitimacy' can be found within the tradition. Gyatso notes that Karma Chags-med (1613-1678), the founder of the Gnas-mdo Bka'-brgyud sect of the Karma bKa'-brgyud tradition, lists four Indian "sources" of gcod.[115]

Surprisingly, 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul does not include Āryadeva within his list of Indian sources of gcod, though he concurs with Karma Chags-med on the other lineages. Instead of listing Āryadeva, Kong-sprul refers to the *Bka'-brgyud-don-gcod*, along with the three other lineages of Pha-dam-pa Sangs-rgyas, Nāropā, and Padmasambhava. However, amongst these different strains, the only extant root text is Āryadeva's poem, *Esoteric Instructions on the Noble Perfection of Wisdom*.[116] This is an unexpected

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[113] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 328.
[114] Ibid., 328.
[115] Ibid., 325-326
[116] 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag ces bya ba

choice considering how prominently Āryadeva figures into the lineage trees of different gcod schools. However, Kong-sprul may simply consider Āryadeva to be the founder of *Bka'-brgyud-don-gcod* and nonetheless he compiled the substantial commentary on Āryadeva's poem entitled *Pure Nectar: A Commentary on the Root Meaning of Gcod*. This commentarial work can be found in the edited compendium of instructions, the *gDams Ngag mDzod*.[117] The commentary and root text are found in the thirteenth and fourteenth volumes of the *gDams Ngag mDzod*, which concern esoteric practices, and fall under the heading of "Pacification and Severance" (*zhi byed, gcod*).[118]

Kong-sprul considers Āryadeva to be a significant early proponent of gcod, the primary formulator of the root meaning of the practice. Far from a ritual manual, the meaning of gcod as presented in *Pure Nectar* portrays the gcod practice as the ultimate expression of the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*). The philosophical, esoteric nature of the commentary is consistent with the theory that legitimacy was of overriding importance to the gcod tradition. As we noted earlier, ritual, while by no means excluded from monastic and scholarly circles had a profound impact upon the wider Buddhist culture and was the province within which a great fluidity of expression existed, where the lines between the apotropaic and soteriological could be easily blurred. No surprise therefore that the preeminent Indian figures of the gcod lineage receives significant attention from Kong-sprul, a

[117] shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gcod kyi gzhung 'grel zag med sbrang rtsi

[118] According to the *Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center*. Gyatso locates these texts in volume nine of the *gDams Ngag mDzod*, classified as *gzung rtsa ba* (Gyatso 1985, 326).

individual of monumental stature within the circle of Ris-med authors, many of whom exhibited a strong impulse to reconnect Tibetan doctrinal innovations to Indic 'origins'.[119]

Āryadeva's grand poem and Kong-sprul's commentary on it are decidedly soteriological in nature. The two texts form a perfect symmetry linking the origin of gcod to the high philosophical teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom. The following opening verse from Āryadeva's poem exemplifies this.

> The essence of the subject matter is the meaning
> Of the perfection of wisdom, not rooted [and] non-dual,
> Liberated from the extremes of reference such as eternalism.
> As much as is possible I will explain this for the sake of beings.[120]

Kong-sprul's commentary acts as a device to assert an orthodox perspective on the gcod rite, one which accords with soteriological aims and ascribes basic philosophical principles to the ritual. His commentary adds further weight to authenticating gcod through an Indian source and endows the tradition with the legitimacy required by the Tibetan Buddhist standards of historical precedent.

Kong-sprul uses Āryadeva's poetry as the foundation from which to craft a standard manual of Buddhist ethics, the perfection of which will lead the practitioner to salvation. As such the first half of

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[119] Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington: Smithsonian Institutional Press, 1993), 538.

[120] Brjod bya'i snying po rtsa ba dang bral ba
gnyis med shes rab pha rol phyin pa'i don
rtag chad la sogs dmigs pa'i mtha' grol ba
ci nus par ni 'gro la phan phyir bshad

the commentary presents the "true meaning of gcod" as, the generation of a mind intent upon enlightenment, the abandoning of non-virtues and the accumulation of virtue, the teaching, practice, and celebration of the six perfections (*pāramitās*), the rejection of arrogance, and the development of proper meditation techniques. The final sections of the commentary delve into esoteric instructions on the luminous nature of mind, the inseparability of clear light and emptiness, as found in Rdzogs-chen and *Mahāmudrā.* In brief, *Pure Nectar* is first a work concerning the ethical and philosophical principles of the Perfection of Wisdom and secondly an analysis of the third turning instructions on Buddha Nature.[121] In point of fact, the word "gcod" is only used a handful of times, such as in a passage regarding "the benefits and advantages of liberation" where Kong-sprul writes, "Having cut the root basis of mind one does not return to cyclic existence again. Having severed the continuum of deluded thoughts one attains complete liberation."[122] A fine expression of soteriology for any practicing Buddhist, yet sterilized of any the provocative visions one would commonly associate with the ritual world of gcod.

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[121] The text quotes from the *Uttaratantra:*

> What is the clear light nature of mind? It is changeless like space itself.
> So that which arises from inauthentic conceptuality,
> These adventitious stains such as desire, will not become afflictions
>
> sems kyi rang bzhin 'od gsal gang yin pa
> de ni nam mkha' bzhin du 'gyur med de
> yang dag min rtog las byung 'dod chags sogs
> glo bur dri mas de nyon mongs mi 'gyur

[122] sems kyi gzhi rtsa chod nas slar yang 'khor bar mi ldog cing
'khrul rtog rgyun chad nas rnam par grol bat hob pa'o

The most substantive connection between the gcod ritual and Āryadeva's root verse is that the poem speaks of not being carried away by the magical displays of gods and demons while practicing in terrifying places (*gnyan-sa*),[123] however this comes nowhere near the visual displays presented within ritual manuals such as *The Garden of All Joy*. Kong-sprul uses Āryadeva's poem as the exemplary expression of the meaning of the gcod ritual yet the links between Āryadeva and gcod are tenuous at best.[124]

Functionally, *Pure Nectar* and the poem upon which it is based, have a universalizing impact upon the gcod tradition presenting the ritual as benignly Buddhist, as well as thoroughly Indian. No one could argue that the most fundamental of Buddhist teachings aims at stripping away the misconceptions of the deluded mind. *Pure Nectar* serves its function for those who would seek to create an orthodox formulation of gcod. The text works as an exegetical commentary that firmly establishes the ritual aspects of gcod in the ground of Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and soteriology. I would argue that such a formal treatise is a necessary component for definitively asserting the orthodox nature of gcod, presenting a reformed and ethicized standard of Buddhist practice. *Pure Nectar* also stands in stark contrast to another commentarial work by Kong-sprul that we will come to next.

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[123] Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 20.

[124] A point Davidson concurs with (Davidson 2002, 291).

A Picture of Tibetan Buddhist Sacrifice

Ritual texts do not shy away from antinomian imagery, the very imagery that is elided when speaking of the 'meaning' of gcod. The normalizing structures detailed above—which avoid sacrificial imagery almost entirely—contrast starkly with the languaging used in ritual practice manuals. I will examine primary sources from the nineteenth century in order to juxtapose the contrasting pictures of the philosophy of gcod that emerged, sanitized of all antinomian imagery, and the ritual manuals that were produced, full of graphic scenes of dismemberment and sacrifice. I previously gave the briefest outline of the ritual visualization from gcod; here a more detailed account is provided.

Kong-sprul presents an unambiguous description of the rite of gcod as it was intended to be practiced. His commentary is an explication of the implicit actions, which are intended to accompany the liturgical text of the sadhana written by Kong-sprul's teacher, Theg-mchog Rdo-rje. The details of Kong-sprul's manual clearly show the horror gcod is intended to engender, scenes of ritual self-sacrifice that rival Nobuo Nakagawa's grisly vision of the eight Buddhist hells in *Jigoku*. Terrifying imagery is central to gcod because it allows the practitioner to develop radical selflessness through freedom from fear.[125] After the formal opening of the ritual, involving all standard preliminaries,[126] the actual practice begins with the projection of consciousness (*'pho-ba*). As Kong-sprul tells us, during this initial stage of the practice the practitioner's consciousness either uses the support of visualization and

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[125] Michael R. Sheehy, "Severing the Source of Fear: Contemplative Dynamics of the Tibetan Buddhist Gcod Tradition," *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, 1 (2005), 46.

[126] The preliminaries to the main ritual include: generating the enlightened intent (*sems-skyed*), taking refuge (*skyabs-'gro*), accumulation of merit (*tshogs-bsags*), clearing away obstructions by the flow of wisdom (*sgrib-sbyongs-ye-shes-chu-rgyun*), and the making of offerings (*mchod-'phul*).

manifests as Vajrayoginī (*Rdo-rje Rnal-'byor-ma*) or becomes the ineffable *dharmadhātu* (*chos-kyi-dbyings*), "realm of truth."

Once the practitioner has seperated her consciousness from the body, the second stage of the process is the creation of the body maṇḍala (*lus-maṇḍala*). Maṇḍala offering (*dkyil-'khor)* is part of the prelimary practices (*sngon-'gro*) any Tibetan Buddhist must complete. In brief, the performance involves visualizing the Buddhist universe, four continenents arrayed around the central axis of the sacred mountain, Mout Meru. The external dimension (the "outer offering," *phyi'i mchod-pa*) of the ritual consists of offering the entire substantive universe to the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, lineage holders, as well as one's personal teachers. This is followed by increasingly more profound levels of the performance, increasing in subtelty. The inner offering (*nang-mchod*) is a visualization in which the practitioners form, divided amongst the various physical aggregates is used as an offering. The secret offering (*gsang-mchod*) is non-substantive, an offering of nonconceptual awareness, involving a similar dynamic to the separation of body and mind without support, dependent upon the realization of emptiness. The offering of the absolute nature of reality (*de-kho-na-nyid mchod-pa*) is an offering based on the complete realization of the ultimate as described within the *Atiyoga* (*rdzogs-chen*) and *Mahāmudrā* (*phyag-rgya chen-po*) as the union of clear light and emptiness, the resultant state of the *Dharmakāya*, "truth body," which is the un-manifest state of all Buddhas and roughly synonymous with the *dharmadhātu*. The maṇḍala offering is immensely complex but what concerns us here is the structure of the offering practice found in the outer offering and the substance of the inner offering, which forms the paradigm for the gcod rite.

Gcod is a maṇḍala offering composed of the disarticulation of the physical form into various substances that are offered in a visualized ritual of sacrifice to a multitude of beings. Upon completion of 'pho-ba the corpse of the practitioner is laid upon the ground, skinned, dismembered, and fashioned into a representation of the holy Mount Meru. Kong-sprul's commentary describes the process as follows:

> Having stripped the skin, the skin is spread out and the [remaining portion of the] corpse heaped on top. The skin becomes the base of golden earth; blood and pus, the ocean of scented water; the fingernails, the bordering iron mountains; the trunk, Mount Meru; and the four limbs, the four continents.[127]

This initial arrangement of the body is followed by various feast offerings (white, red, ganacakra, and remainder). In the *Garden of All Joy* Kong-sprul first presents condensed versions of the white and red feast offerings, these abbreviated versions are followed by multiple versions of each type of feast, and the ritual concludes with the ganacakra and remainder offerings (the latter being a continuation of the former). In each of these various feasts the corpse is reorganized in a variety of forms and distributed to the many guests who have been invited to participate. In-between the multiple iterations of the ritual visualization the body is reconstituted only for another dismemberment to occur. The imagery is extravagantly violent and elaborately inventive. Below are several sections from the ritual manual that

[127] Lama Lodö Rinpoche, trans., *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 49.

best exemplify some of the various images and highlights the carnival of sacrificial imagery that appears.

The host that gathers round the gcod-pa includes benevolent figures such as the gurus of the practitioner's lineage, protector deities, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas but also the malevolent host or terrors including, "the demon Lord of Death…place demons and resident demons, which are the gods and demons of this desolate place."[128] One alternates between the series of white and red offerings, the former distributed to the high guests alone while red offerings are shared out to all. A series of white offerings start off the ritual, the creation of the feast of pure nectar is described in the following verse:

> Skin the corpse and spread out the skin. Cut off three [limbs]—a leg and arms—and erect them on the skin. This becomes a tripod of three human heads. Put the skull on it. Inside is one's body, chopped up. By stirring three times with the hook knife, it becomes pure nectar. The blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions gather into the skull-cup in one's left hand. Nectar overflows from one's crown [as Vajrayogini] and dissolves into the skull-cup in front, which becomes an ocean of inseparable wisdom and samaya nectar.[129]

Multiple red offerings (*dmar-mchod*) are made subsequent to the initial white offerings. Two examples express the diversity of imagery presented. The red feast is central because it is the very ritual practice that historically was performed externally and included animal and human sacrifice.[130] Here in a gcod

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[128] Lama Lodö Rinpoche, trans., *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 36-37.
[129] Ibid., 56-57.
[130] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 80-92

ritual manual we see the internalization of the performance, one that acts upon the practitioner herself. The first red offering is distributed to both higher and lower guests.

> The four limbs of the corpse are severed by the hook knife and planted in the four directions. Skin the skin and hang it [on the four limbs]; inside is a swirling lake of flesh and blood. From one's heart [as Vajrayoginī] emanate four dakinis—white, yellow, red, and green—who grasp the four corners of the human skin. Think that all are pleased.[131]

A red offering reserved exclusively for the demonic host follows the initial feast.

> Vajrayoginī chops the corpse with the hook knife. In swirling ocean of blood, bones are planted down like a throne. From the tip of the bones, flesh becomes raised like banners. From these, flesh, bone, and blood—those three—fall continuously. Think that all the demons and obstructers enjoy for kalpas.[132]

In the hermeneutics of the tradition these grotesque performances are simply the terror invoking imagery that functions to help the practitioner realize the intangible nature of physical form, ripening the ground for the realization of perfect emptiness. Additionally, such offerings constitute sacrificial acts of atonement,[133] repaying one's karmic debt for all past injuries, a distribution with a distinctly soteriological functionality. So, even in the commentaries on ritual manuals we see the inclusion of salvific language.

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[131] Lama Lodö Rinpoche, trans., *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 58.
[132] Lama Lodö Rinpoche, trans., *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 64.
[133] Dpal-sprul Rin-po-che expresses this at the end of his description of the feast offerings: "Your debts are repaid. You are delivered from those deadly avengers and purified of all your harmful deeds and obscurations. Everyone is placated and satisfied" (Padmakara 1998, 301).

The language of the ritual manual involves consecration of the various feast offerings and is highly particular in the exact methods for their performance. The ritual described by Kong-sprul is one of atonement or recompense based on consecrated offerings. As such the gcod performance as described in Kong-sprul's manual more than adequately demonstrates why we need to think of gcod through the language of sacrifice. Once the tradition has been grounded in legitimizing antecedents the visceral imagery of a sacrificial practice (i.e. the red offering) can be employed efficaciously to soteriological ends. By theorizing gcod as a sacrificial practice we can more adequately articulate the correspondence between the assertion of orthodoxy (through condemnation of aberrant practices) and the assimilation of functional tropes.

Two messages suffuse gcod texts, one that condemns the performance of blood-rites and another that portrays gcod as a strictly internal process and yet frequently expresses indifference toward the physical form. While external antinomian practices are condemned, even traditionalists are ambivalent about the sacrosanct nature of the human body. Kong-sprul writes:

> Go to a haunted place
> And when gods and demons manifest,
> Separate space and awareness.
> The body is material, like a stone.
> The mind is immaterial, as the sky.
> Therefore who harms and who is harmed?[134]

[134] gnyan sar phyin nas lha 'dre yi
gzi byin byang na bem rig phral
lus 'di bem bo rdo ba 'dra

Kong-sprul's separation of the awareness body from the physical body does not actually help matters because one might argue that if such a separation is possible and the physical body is little more than an impervious stone there would be no harm in actually sacrificing it in a way emblematic of the teaching of the jātakas. Yet we know that above all Kong-sprul intends the ritual to be internalized, as he condemns any external performance of the rite.[135] Why then is there an insistence on practicing in haunted places? This must be understood a psychological catalyst to propel the practitioner into the ultimate realization of selflessness.[136]

Mumford observes that when the gcod rite is performed in Gyasumdo, *torma* are used and the process of offering ones body to demons is performed internally. All the same when he asks what the axiomatic meaning of gcod is his lama informant answers, "It is the distribution. It is turning one's body into the merit offering and distributing it to all the guests."[137] There is a certain dissonance between the philosophical interpretations of the rite and these proclamations, which do not make hard and fast distinctions between internal and external realities, the line between visualized and material realities blurs.

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de la gnod par mi 'gyur ro
sems ni 'ngos med nam mkha' 'dra
de ni sus gnod su la gnod

[135] Lama Lodö Rinpoche, trans., *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 35-36.
[136] Michael R. Sheehy, "Severing the Source of Fear: Contemplative Dynamics of the Tibetan Buddhist Gcod Tradition," *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, 1 (2005), 51.
[137] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 162.

Hagiographical accounts of Ma-gcig's life express the same conflation of internal and external realities. In the legend of the Tree of Serlag Ma-gcig, at the age of twenty, was perfecting her yogic skills and attained the "adamantine meditative stabilization," (*vajropāma-samādhi*, *rdo rje lta bu'i ting nge 'dzin*). Having absorbed her consciousness in the dharmadhātu she rises into the air and disappears, only to reappear at the palace of the ferocious nāga king, Dragpo Dakyong. Jérôme Edou translates the story from a section of Ma-gcig's biography entitled, *An Exposition of Transforming the Aggregates into an Offering of Food, Illuminating the Meaning of Chöd.*[138]

> This place was so terrifying that no one could even bear to look at it. She immediately overpowered the nāga king by her samādhi, and as he couldn't stand this, he called for help to all the other nāgas in the region. From everywhere they assembled into an immense army, showing an entire array of terrifying magical powers. *Machig instantly transformed her body into a food offering for demons* (emphasis added). Unable to destroy her, the demons were forced to surrender and offered her their essence in order to survive.[139]

This account does not suggest an imagined offering but an actual self-sacrifice emblematic of the most fantastic gift-of-the-body accounts from the jātakas. We do not see the gcod rite as it came to be in subsequent centuries but as a very real offering of Ma-gcig's physical form. The Tree of Serlag episode is a mythical expression of Ma-gcig's express enthusiasm for self-sacrifice as a means to achieve

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[138] *Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod don gsal byed*

[139] Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 134.

liberation. "This living body that is held so dear—if it is cast away without a thought as food for demons, then fixation on the self of this interim body will be severed spontaneously."[140]

Because of this ambiguity a counter-point to physical sacrifice must be constructed. We find multiple examples of this in the nineteenth century, our primary example being that of 'Jigs-bral Chos-kyi-seng-ge (Khams-smyon), author of *The Dharma History of Pacifying and Severance*,[141] whose work is central to my argument. Khams-smyon and his contemporaries shared a common voice with a much earlier figure in Tibetan Buddhist history, the tenth century king Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od, whose work provides the seminal critique of literalist applications of tantric blood-rituals.

[140] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 110.

[141] Zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi chos 'byung rin po che'i 'phreng ba thar pa'i rgyan

Reform in Tibet

Ye-shes-'od: The Beginnings of a Mahāyāna Orthodoxy

The period of the later dissemination (*phyi-dar*) of Buddhist teachings throughout Tibet, which began at the end of the tenth century, involved the domesticization of tantric ritualism, a societal force outside the control of institutional powers. Davidson describes standard tantric practices as they were derived from texts of the seventh to ninth century:

> Ritual systems promoted in these texts tended to emphasize a Buddhist form of the ancient Indian fire sacrifice (*homa*), for the purpose of the four tantric ritual goals: pacifying (diseases, enemies, emotions), augmenting (money, power, merit), controlling (opponents, gods, passions), and killing (enemies, gods, sense of self).[142]

Three texts were especially influential, the *Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṁvara,* and the *Hevajra*[143] *Tantra.*[144] All three contained multiple elements; exegetical commentaries, ritual instructions, etc. and all were widely accepted in India by the tenth century. However, it took some time for Tibetans to accept these works and to interpret their attendant ritual prescriptions.

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[142] Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 35.

[143] 'Gos Lo-tsa-ba suggests that the gcod rite is based on practices found in the *Hevajra-tantra* (Roerich 2007, 980).

[144] Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 36.

Increasingly tantric lineages received greater scrutiny and those attempting to assert a new orthodoxy called tantric doctrines out as reasons for reform.[145] One of the preeminent spokespersons, asserting the import of orthodoxy was Ye-shes-'od, who protested strongly against tantric performances involving blood rites and other antinomian activities (as may be found in all the tantras above). Ye-shes-'od— considered by many Tibetans to be a bodhisattva king[146]—and others viewed the sacrificial practices of the tantras that were entering the imagination of Tibetans as an aberration, a departure from Mahāyāna norms. Consequently, Ye-shes-'od's ordinance was aimed directly at tantric teachings that were propounded by both the Rnying-ma and Gsar-ma schools (old and new school respectively).[147]

When esoteric teachings became institutionalized in early medieval Indian and their hermeneutical structure entered the purview of monastic authorities the latter were not content to allow the laity, ascetics, or tribal authorities to dictate the normative views of orthodoxy.[148] Samten Karmay suggests that by the time of Ye-shes-'od, tantric teachings were out of the control of religious authorities, being disseminated haphazardly amongst the populous.[149] Such decentralization of ritual power was contrary to the will of the ruling elites causing the reform response to erupt from the highest authority, the king himself.

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[145] Ibid., 244-245.
[146] Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," *Tibetan studies in honor of Hugh Richardson* (1979), 150.
[147] Ibid., 151.
[148] Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 144-153.
[149] Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," *Tibetan studies in honor of Hugh Richardson* (1979), 152.

By the middle of the eleventh century the tantras had gained a firm foothold within the ranks of leading religious figures in Tibet and yet the presence of these texts and their associated rituals caused a significant degree of consternation amongst the aristocratic branches of society that wished to see the reform of tantric ritual and assertion of renewed ethical values.[150] In part the movement towards reform is a reaction to Tibetan communities falling into literalist interpretations and ritual performances of esoteric tantric scriptures resulting in what Davidson describes as:

> A general sense of a religious tradition fragmented and out of control, with the monastic clothing and outward forms being maintained while the actual behaviors of Tibetan religious were slowly being accommodated to Tibetan village practices of blood sacrifice to mountain gods and the marked Tibetan proclivity to greater sexual license.[151]

Consequently the esoteric instructions of the tantras became in the tenth and eleventh centuries the "most prestigious and most problematic"[152] form of doctrinal artifact. Into this complicated and charged environment stepped "one of the best known figures among the descendants of the Tibetan royal dynasty in the late 10th and early 11th centuries."[153] Given our current study there may be some irony in the fact that Ye-shes-'od is said to have "sacrificed his life."[154] Ye-shes-'od presided over the dissemination of *vinaya* instructions (instructions for monastics), brought to Tibet by the Indian

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[150] Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 115.
[151] Ibid., 120.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," *Tibetan studies in honor of Hugh Richardson* (1979), 150.
[154] Ibid., 150.

missionary Dānaśīla. Ye-shes-'od presented to Tibet a strong criticism of tantric ritual which concerned him for many reasons, one of which was its use of sacrifice as an apotropaic process of appeasement. In response to such concerns his ordinance represents a seminal moment in the articulation of Mahāyāna orthodoxy within Tibet. The aim of which was to shift Tibetans away from literalist interpretations of sacred texts and place greater emphasis on the soteriological functions of ritual practice.

After the reforms of Ye-shes-'od's time, the apparent implacability of tantric influence led scholars and authors to take a more nuanced approach to the question of sacrifice, distinguishing metaphorical illustration from literal textual interpretation. Rather than attempting to completely suppress the Tantras, Tibetans embraced them, subverting the powerful impulse of transgression through rationalizing, in particular, the sacrificial rite and developing an internalized activity for self-transformation.[155] Gcod is a significant part of this Buddhist development. As such Ye-shes-'od's writings are key to understanding the tensions surrounding sacrifice which confronted nineteenth century thinkers.

Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od, the king of Pu-hrang, ruled at the end of the tenth through the early-eleventh century and is largely responsible for "the revival of the Buddhist monastic tradition in Western Tibet."[156] This revival was also involved substantial reform, aimed directly at tantric practices, which were viewed by the king as a corrupting influence upon authentic dharma. Primarily, three forms of Tantric praxis concerned Ye-shes-'od, rites of sexual union (*sbyor*), liberation rites (*sgrol*), and

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[155] Hugh B. Urban, "The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship, and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* December 2001, Vol. 69, No. 4, pp. 797-798.

[156] Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," *Tibetan studies in honor of Hugh Richardson* (1979), 150.

feast rituals (*tshogs*). In his epistle he wrote, "The hidden meaning of the secret mantra was vitiated, and it was further corrupted by the rites of 'sexual union', 'deliverance', and 'food offerings'."[157]

In no uncertain terms Ye-she-'od aimed his condemnation at any Buddhist who would engage in these antinomian performances. This included any and all monastics, ascetics, and lay practitioner who were, in his words, divorced from the "Three Ways" of the Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, and Bodhisattva.[158] "To claim to be Mahāyānist," he declared, "though one is not, is like a donkey wearing the skin of a lion."[159] This forceful rhetorical speech is central to the assertion of orthodox views, respected and influential authorities asserting what the tradition is not, often accompanied by robust condemnations of any doctrines that fall under the rubric of heretical teachings (*chos-log*). To elucidate what would contravene the strictures of these orthodox positions Ye-she-'od offered the following passages:

> Heretical tantras, pretending to be Buddhist, are spread in Tibet.
> These have brought harm to the kingdom in the following ways:
> As 'deliverance' has become popular the goats and sheep are
> afflicted.
> As [the] 'sexual rite' has become popular the different classes of
> people are mixed.
> As the ritual of medicine has become popular the materials for
> treating diseases are used up.
> As the ritual of the corpse has become popular the making of
> offerings in cemeteries is abandoned.

[157] Ibid., 151.
[158] Ibid., 153.
[159] Ibid., 153.

As the ritual of sacrifice has become popular it happens that
people get delivered alive.
As the demons who eat flesh are worshipped there is plague among
men and animals.
As the smoke of burnt (human) corpses is sent up into space,
The gods of the mountains and the nāgas are offended.
Is this the practice of Mahāyāna.[160]

The "ritual of the corpse" seems to have been a practice by which corporeal artifacts (i.e. bones, flesh, etc.) were seen to grant the possessor magical powers (*siddhi*).[161] Ye-she-'od saw such treatment of the corpse as interfering with due funerary rites. As people sought to use crematory objects for apotropaic purposes, the emphasis on funerary offerings for the sake of devotion and prayer shifted to instrumental ritual disciplines used to accumulate self-power. Ye-shes-'od's condemnation of sacrifice and the performance of blood-rites involving the burning of human remains is paradigmatic of accusations of nineteenth century reformers who used the human sacrifice as a rallying call for ethical clarifications of various tantric rituals. Ye-shes-'od does not attempt, as early Buddhist scripture did, to reform the sacrificial rite, rather his only agenda is to call it out as one of many aberrations that stands as an affront to normative Buddhist values and ritual practice. His rejection of the sacrificial rite is one of a number that appear over subsequent centuries and come to be echoed in the nineteenth century by lamas and scholars that would follow a similar approach to reform.

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[160] Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," *Tibetan studies in honor of Hugh Richardson* (1979), 154.
[161] Ibid., 160, n. 46.

Blood Rituals in Tibet

Liberation rites (*sgrol-ba*) were paramount to Ye-shes-'od's concern over the unmediated spread of tantric texts and ritual. Liberation rites are diverse in their imagery but at their center is a violent blood sacrifice. Generally, such a sacrifice is performed in effigy, but on certain occasions the ritual was performed literally with the killing of a live victim, either animal or human.[162] Ye-shes-'od was concerned with literalist interpretations of tantric texts for this very reason and such concern was not reserved to his time period. As Jacob Dalton writes, "Liberation rites were central to early Mahāyoga practice, and they went on to play an important role throughout Tibetan culture."[163] In fact, Dalton observes that ritual blood offerings associated with tantric liberation rites persisted well into the nineteenth century. Mumford supports this assertion, confirming the occurrence of the deer sacrifice well into the twentieth century, in both Nepal and Tibet.[164]

Efforts were made in the nineteenth century to suppress blood rituals. Rig-'dzin Gar-gyi Dbang-phyug (1858-1930) was a disciple of mKhyen-brtse'i dBang-po (1820-1892) one of the most influential figures in the *Ris-med* circle of intellectual giants. Gar-gyi Dbang-phyug wrote a work condemning the practices of blood sacrifice in a treatise, aptly entitled, *The Dangers of Blood Sacrifice*.[165] Based on the emphatic denunciations, contained within this text of any and all blood rites, Dalton concludes that, "the offering of flesh into the maṇḍala remained popular enough to require repeated condemnation by

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[162] Jacob Dalton, *The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 77-94.
[163] Ibid., 77.
[164] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 64.
[165] *dmar mchod kyi nyes dmigs*

Buddhist teachers in later Tibet."[166] In other words, even with the influence of such revered figures as Ye-shes-'od and Gar-gyi Dbang-phyug's own contemporary, Dpal-sprul Rin-po-che (also, Rdza Dpal-sprul) speaking out intently against forms of ritual violence, antinomian blood rites persisted.

Dalton suggests that in the ninth and tenth centuries especially, just prior to the monarchy of Ye-shes-'od, blood sacrifices enjoyed certain popularity within Tibetan culture. It was at that historical moment that the exchange of blood for consciousness occurred. In other words, references to 'blood' in tantric literature came to be interpreted as a metaphorical allusion to the movement of consciousness. This is one of a number of ways to subvert activities that contravene against what religious authorities consider to be standard modes of Buddhist practice, interpretation of esoteric texts to suit a developing orthodox model through the use of hermeneutics. Blood, the primary substance of power in the Dunhuang manuscripts was reinterpreted as a metaphor for consciousness to make tantric performance conform to the moral standards of Buddhist orthodoxy.[167] For example, the *Hevajra-tantra* (c. 8th cen.) contains multiple references to *rakta*, "blood." In the hermeneutics of later interpretation blood comes to stand for the feminine principle, which in turn is representational of wisdom.[168] So when the *Hevajra-tantra* refers to drinking "the blood of the Four Māras," the reference may be intended to suggest that through metaphorically consuming that which is most poisonous one gains the power of wisdom through adversity. The tantras are always complicated by the fact that the texts themselves contain antinomian symbolism, interpreted as soteriological in effect by later

[166] Jacob Dalton, The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 92.
[167] Ibid., 93.
[168] David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), 37.

commentators and allowing a certain hermeneutical flexibility. For instance, the *Hevajra-tantra* decodes its own metaphorical language, equating "frankincense" with "blood", "camphor" with "semen", "rice" with "human flesh".[169] These equivalences are made in commentarial works on the root tantra, both of which Snellgrove translates. Therefore, it is often rather ambiguous as to which metaphor ruled the day, the sanitized interpretation of later commentators or the colorfully grotesque symbolism of the tantric text itself. Regardless, the tantric source materials *were* interpreted to display manifestly Buddhist qualities as manuals for producing radical shifts in mundane consciousness by internalizing contentious rituals such as sacrifice.

Dalton concludes from his analysis of the Dunhuang tantric sources that the tantric liberation rites practiced there contained "many elements that are characteristic of sacrifice."[170] His observations show a distinct similarity between the sacrificial foundations of tantric liberation rites and gcod. Dalton describes, sgrol-ba "is exorcistic (Frazer); it is consecratory (Hubert and Mauss); and as an act of violent transgression, it is 'aneconomic, gratuitous, indeed excessive' (Derrida)."[171] The same could be said for gcod. In particular, we have seen the exorcistic component of the gcod ritual, which corresponds to the apotropaic elements (as detailed in the story of Lama Wangdu, etc.). While it is beyond question that the apotropaic forms of the practice, while often downplayed or condemned outright, are nonetheless commonly performed.

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[169] David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), 100.
[170] Jacob Dalton, The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 92.
[171] Ibid., 92.

Indeed two quotes appear in our primary source material, Khams-smyon's history of aberrant gcod (which I will come to in the next section), which suggest that by the nineteenth century those wishing to define the practice as unambigiously soteriological may have had to face down the threat of gcod 'degenerating' into apotropaic activities and possibly even blood rites. The third Karmapa, Rang-byung Rdo-rjes (1284-1339), who composed treatises and commentarial works on Mahāmudrā, gcod, and *doha* (a type of religious verse) is used as a historical exemplar, credited as having "dispelled aberrant teachings, like the sun burning away the clouds."[172] Given his time period it is likely that his reforms aimed at abolishing any literalistic approach to the ritual, to enforce the legitimacy of the gcod rite. Yet, even in Khams-smyon's day individuals may have performed gcod as a blood sacrifice or an apotropaic approach to demon appeasement. Hence Khams-smyon wrote, "we still have to describe them (i.e. aberrant teachings) in some detail these days."

[172] rje rang byung rdo rjes gcod log bsal te nyi ma sprin bral ltar du mdzad pa yin

19th Century Clarification: Gcod and Orthopraxy

The precept against taking life remained a central concern for Tibetan Buddhists and moral injunctions are included within the writings of many of Tibet's most famous authors to eradicate what must have been relatively normalized activities within a shepherding culture. Sgam-po Pa Bsod-nams Rin-chen (1079–1153) in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, provided categorized divisions, outlining the impetus towards and the consequences resulting from various forms of violence against living beings. These divisions were taken up by nineteenth century thinkers and used to condemn any and all violence, by ritual enactment or otherwise. Of special interest to the current study is Sgam-po Pa's discussion of the three types of killing, which offers an unambiguous reference to sacrificial rites as a form of deluded ignorance.

> Classification of Taking Life. There are three types: taking life through the door of desire, taking life through the door of hatred, and taking life through the door of ignorance. The first means to take life for meat, pelts and so forth, for sport, for one's own wealth, and to maintain oneself and loved ones. The second one means to take life through the arising of hatred, out of resentment, or in competition. *The third one refers to making sacrifices and so forth* (emphasis added).[173]

[173] Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche, trans., *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1998), 112.

Nineteenth century views on sacrifice and non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) had not waivered much from the twelfth century. A particularly popular example of this is found in the writings of the revered religious master, Dpal-sprul Rin-po-che. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (*kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*) contains explicit admonitions never to take the life of another living being and elaborates on the same structure used within Gampopa's text. Rdza Dpal-sprul's definition of killing does not explicitly mention sacrifice but is so encompassing that it must certainly be a denouncement against any form of sacrifice that would use a sentient being as victim. Rdza Dpal-sprul writes, "Taking life means doing anything intentionally to end the life of another being, whether human, animal or any other living creature."[174] He continues to explain that any party involved in an act of killing is culpable for all the requisite karmic debt of that action. This indictment runs deeply through the tradition, extending to monks and high lama's who would abuse their offices and allow their desires to overwhelm their virtue. Rdza Dpal-sprul's text illustrates the reformists concern of his time, to hold to rigorous ethical standards and condemn those who would lead the tradition into inauthentic or negligent behavior. However, more than reform the nearly exact correspondence between Rdza Dpal-sprul's text and Gampopa's illustrates a non-sectarian consensus on the repercussions of breaking the first precept. Rdza Dpal-sprul rearranges the three classifications slightly, beginning with killing out of hatred, but the similarity is unmistakable.

[174] Padmakara Translation Group, *Words of My Perfect Teacher: A Complete Translation of a Classic Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 1998), 102.

> A warrior killing an enemy in battle is an example of killing out of hatred. Killing a wild animal to eat its flesh or wear its skin is killing out of desire. Killing without knowing the consequences of right and wrong—or, like certain tīrthikas, in the belief that it is a virtuous thing to do—is killing out of ignorance.[175]

Tīrthikas, non-believers, encompasses all those who may take an unorthodox approach to religion, for example, engaging in sacrificial worship. Rdza Dpal-sprul's picture of orthodoxy is uncompromisingly non-violent and not even lamas of his own tradition escaped his moralistic condemnations.

In an approach similar to that found in early sūtra examples, we do witness a subversion of the sacrificial rite. This comes with the inclusion of a rich discussion of ritual of gcod detailed in *Words of My Perfect Teacher.* This text is a commentary on the foundational preliminary practices (*sngon-'gro*) of the Klong-chen Snying-tig school of the Rnying-ma sect. Therefore gcod, or the *kusāli* practice, as it is alternatively called, is included within the activities that every monastic and lay disciple of the Rnying-ma sect must undergo. Rdza Dpal-sprul introduces the ritual with the following lines:

> To accumulate merit and wisdom, yogis who have renounced ordinary life…use visualizations to make offerings of their own bodies…to sever our infatuation with our own bodies and use them as an offering is therefore far more beneficial than offering any other possession.[176]

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[175] Padmakara Translation Group, *Words of My Perfect Teacher: A Complete Translation of a Classic Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 1998), 102.
[176] Ibid., 297-298

We also see in his writings on the gcod practice that he readily distinguishes what he sees as the true character of the practice, an internalized metamorphoses, from the false approach of apotropaic performance.

> If you cut your belief in demons at the root from within, you will perceive everything as pure...People today who claim to be practitioners of Chö do not understand any of this, and persist in thinking of spirits as something outside themselves. They believe in demons, and keep perceiving them all the time.[177]

Including the gcod rite as a central pillar in the initiatory practice of the Rnying-ma subverts the sacrificial impetus, driving it inward where it can be readily condoned as part and parcel with orthopraxy. This does not change the self-sacrificial nature of gcod but makes it palatable for an orthodox Buddhist. Rdza Dpal-sprul writings on gcod further demonstrate the real existence of literalist interpretations of ritual manuals which the orthodoxy continuously worked to establish as metaphorical or maps of internal consciousness, performances with a soteriological intent. It is clear that attempts to use gcod as an apotropaic or exorcistic practice persisted and indications from other sources suggests that with them Tibetan blood rites continued to plague those who sought to control the religious expressions of the diverse Tibetan community.

Gcod certainly served a function for mainstream religion in Tibet, otherwise its ascendency would have been extremely short lived. Those within the Mahāyāna orthodoxy perhaps found in the

[177] Ibid., 305.

gcod practice a means to reorient the focus of the religious community while maintaining the efficacy of sacrificial rites, much as the Buddha had done centuries earlier. Obviously, animal sacrifice and human sacrifice are worlds apart, while lamas may have historically turned a blind eye to the sacrifice of an animal, the ritual killing of a human being would be far beyond the pale of passive acceptance. Given however that there exists compelling evidence that human sacrifice has taken place within the timeframe of gcod's development and has been used by nineteenth century reformers as a contrasting heresy, it is possible to view the orthodox formulation of gcod as a mechanism to reform antinomian extremes including human sacrifice. Diemberger and Hazod write, "Only when and where Buddhist institutions managed to establish completely their philosophical religious approach could they [i.e. sacrificial activities] be abolished or substituted."[178] Gcod as it was normalized to nineteenth century standards of orthodoxy is a substitutional sacrifice, it stands in for the actual gift-of-the-body and the primary agent of the performance stands inwardly to herself, her sacrificial gift an internal process of cutting away self-clinging.

Clarification/Reform: The Tibetan Exclusion of Sacrifice

Nineteenth century gcod reformers derived the impetus for their 'purifications' from earlier historical reforms such as the attempts of Ye-she-'od and two other authors writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Ngag-dbang Bstan-'dzin Nor-bu (1867-1940), the Rnying-ma lama well known for

[178] Hildegard Diemberger, G. Hazod. 1997. Animal Sacrifices and Mountain Deities in Southern Tibet – Mythology, Rituals and Politics. In: Karmay S. & P. Sagant (Eds). Les habitants du toit du monde. Volume in Honour of Alexander Macdonald. Société d'Ethnologie, Nanterre, Paris, France. 275.

his commentarial works, tells of the "clarification" of gcod-log by the thirteenth century biographer of Ma-gcig Labs-gron, Brtson-'grus Seng-ge (1207-1278).[179] Then one of the most vocal opponents of heterodox ritualism was 'Jigs-bral Chos-kyi-seng-ge (Khams-smyon), a nineteenth century writer of medicinal treatises and mystical poetry who pseudonymously authored *The Dharma History of Pacifying and Severance*.[180] Khams-smyon's own historical account establishes much of its authority through reflecting the precedent of the third Karma Bka'-brgyud Karma-pa, Rang-byung Rdo-rje's (1284-1339) attempts to cleanse the Tibetan landscape of aberrant gcod rites (*gcod-log*). Khams-smyon's text will serve as our primary source material for how exclusion functions in the establishment of orthodoxy. His text demonstrates that the move to eradicate literalist heresies begins with the establishment of heterodox figureheads who can be held up as examples of moral deficiency. This is similar in many respects to the reform of tantric practices as they entered Tibet.

Khams-smyon's text on aberrant gcod contains a central implicit argument around which all subsidiary points revolve. This is for an orthodox standard, defined against heterodox ritual expressions. This argument is constructed upon the juxtaposition of the grim unorthodox sacrifices and apotropaic rituals of the invented figure of Co lab-sgron with the "true" gcod of Ma-gcig Lab-sgron. The fulcrum of Khams-smyon's argument is balanced upon the most heinous aberration of all: blood sacrifice, a concern not all together foreign to Khams-smyon's contemporaries as we have seen from Dalton's study of Gar-gyi Dbang-phyug.

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[179] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), fn. 76, pg. 335.

[180] Zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi chos 'byung rin po che'i 'phreng ba thar pa'i rgyan

Blood offerings and sacrifice are the common tropes of degeneration, the movement away from true Dharma. As already detailed in our analysis of *The Garden of All Joy*, we find the imagery of sacrifice alive and well in nineteenth century sources on gcod, a sacrifice in the domain of the visualized ritual world, and consequently the need for exclusion falls upon real or invented opponents who fell prey to the trap of literalist interpretations of sacrificial manuals. Those who sought to affirm an orthodox gcod were then forced to emphasize its philosophical and ethical qualities, aspects that, as we have seen, are reflected in modern scholarship on gcod.

Religious institutions always experience conflicts over conventions of doctrine and ritual praxis. Buddhism in Tibet has been no exception and the issue of sacrifice has clearly continued to haunt the tradition to the present. When performances of apotropaic rituals of exorcism and appeasement in the form of sacrificial blood rites appear a responsive opposition is enlivened from those asserting an orthodox view. Much of this tension has persisted through the struggle to define acceptable tantric forms of religiosity within Tibetan Buddhism, a development that necessitated a distinction between literalism and elaborate hermeneutical coding. The latter was acceptable to orthodoxy and the former, dangerous. Sacrifice, from the orthodox perspective, must always be understood as the development of moral character, not as a physical ritual performance. Thus the urge to convey the centrality of internal processes versus external forms of performance was kindled. The most relevant articulation of orthodox thought, still highly relevant to matters of sacrifice today is found in the nineteenth century milieu that spawned one of most influential literary developments in Tibet's history.

The *Ris-med* Literary Circle

Nineteenth century Tibet played host to a cultural renaissance, one that included, amongst other events, the flourishing of what E. Gene Smith has termed the "nonsectarian (*ris med*) movement."[181] The ris-med was a circle of nineteenth century intellectuals, who shared a common interest in ecumenism, collection and preservation of textual sources, and a group of individuals who held to a distinctly reformist impulse. Not inconsequentially the eruption of discursive engagement, which defines the *ris-med* period is responsible for producing the gcod documents that are the primary interest of our current study. The non-sectarian intelligencia comprised some of the most influential figures in Tibetan Buddhist history, especially with regard to the traditions development into the twentieth century. Three of the most prominent amongst the many dozens of individuals who figure into the many overlapping spheres of intellectual influence are, 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul Blo-gros Mtha'-yas (1813-1899), 'Jam-dbyangs Mkhyen-brtse'i Dbang-po (1820-1892), 'Jam-mgon 'Ju Mi-pham Rgya-mtsho (1846-1912), and Rdza Dpal-sprul (1808-1887). These individuals especially Kong-sprul continued a dedicated systematization of doctrinal literature that had undergone an effulgence in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Most notably within the works of the great Rnying-ma bla-ma, Klong-chen Rab-'byam-pa Dris-med-'od-zer, by whom Kong-sprul was dramatically influenced.[182] As Smith notes in his essay, "'Jam mgon Kong sprul and the Nonsectarian Movement," the three centuries proceeding up to

[181] E. Gene Smith, Kurtis R. Schaeffer, ed., *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 235-272.
[182] Ibid., 241.

the eighteenth century contain a history of "progressive solidification"[183] of doctrinal, ritual, and sectarian elements. By the time the 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul was codifying the essential documents of the gcod tradition a significant collection of legitimated texts had already been established and systematized, so that whatever gcod would become it must be found to conform within the boundaries of a well built historical architecture of doctrine.

The cultural revitalization and doctrinal systematization of which the most prodigious minds of the nineteenth century were a part was preceded by centuries of bitter dispute (beginning with the introduction of the early tantras discussed above) and a full three-hundred years of sectarian solidification during which time the divided sects further cemented their particular stances on any and all dharmic concerns.[184] Formed in this atmosphere, 'Jam-mgon Kong-sprul, became an eclectic intellectual who was schooled extensively in his early years in Bon ritual and tradition. He went on to receive his vows as a Rnying-ma monk and subsequently receive instruction from over sixty different gurus.[185] After the 1848 war between the Dge-lugs-pa monastery of 'Ba 'Chos-sde and the Si-tu monastery of Spungs-ri Dgon-nang, Kong-sprul and Mkhyen-brtse'i came into there own as figures of great influence amongst the leading powers of Lhasa and during this period these two spiritual compatriots continued to develop their religious stature.[186]

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[183] Ibid.

[184] E. Gene Smith, Kurtis R. Schaeffer, ed., *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 237-241.

[185] Ibid., 247-248.

[186] ibid, 249.

In his development as a leading intellectual Kong-sprul shows allegiance to the normative values of the Buddhist tradition in Tibet, asserting well-established Mahāyāna viewpoints. An illustration of this point comes from his commentary on the eleventh Karmapa's ritual manual in which he wrote a direct condemnation of the so called aberrant practices that would make gcod a performance for the sake of material aspirations and/or financial gains.

> By the Mantrayana conduct for training awareness associated with taking on the unwanted and trampling the causes of evil; understanding gods and demons as one's own mind; and knowing the equality of self and others, ego-clinging can instantly be cut. If one does not understand this and hopes to tame demons for the sake of food, fame, or profit, and views one's own illusory appearance as the enemy, then…one engages in rough, superficial conduct. Known as the "reversal of Chod," it is a very frightful mistake on this path.[187]

While Kong-sprul does not explicitly list exorcism, petitionary offerings, or apotropaic rites, it is clear from his assertion that *gcod-yul* ("object-severing") is "the wisdom view of the Second Turning,"[188] that he intends his audience to understand this practice as essentially philosophical in nature and many Western scholars and translators have followed his lead. Kong-sprul applies the sort of hermeneutics we have already heard about as central to interpretations of tantra. For instance, coding "gods and demons" as a metaphor of various manifestations of mind. This is framing the rite as soteriological, a ritual expression of the perfections of wisdom. Kong-sprul does not describe "the reversal of Chod,"

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[187] Lama Lodö Rinpoche, trans., *Chöd Practice Manual and Commentary* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 36.
[188] Ibid., 35.

gcod-log in this passage, but we know from his brief description that the rite was used for apotropaic purposes and classified demons as a definite reality reality.

Beyond Kong-sprul's compositions, late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Tibet witnessed a resurgence of literary treatises on the gcod ritual deeply influenced by the *ris-med* inclination for doctrinal harmony across previous sectarian divides. Numerous commentarial texts come to us from this period as well as the burgeoning of two Nyingma gcod lineages.[189] Accompanying the revived interest in gcod developed was a concern with aberrations of the practice (*gcod-log*). Attempts to eradicate such aberrations were made by several scholars. Amongst them was Ngag-dbang Bstan-'dzin Nor-bu (1867-1940) who compiled a historical account of all the essential figures within the gcod tradition.[190] This biographical work serves as a means to provide gcod with an unshakeable historical basis, establishing legitimation through recognized forbearers.

Beyond this work on gcod, Ngag-dbang Bstan-'dzin Nor-bu was a revered Tibetan master, educated in the Rnying-ma tradition at the prestigious Smin-grol-gling Monastery, was especially known for his rich commentarial works concerning the *Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas*.[191] Ngag-dbang Bstan-'dzin Nor-bu joined his contemporaries, Khams-smyon and Kong-sprul in taking a direct interest in setting gcod in good standing within orthodoxy. Nor-bu's method for this "clarification" was to juxtapose the normative ritual praxis of gcod to the aberration of gcod-log. His device for providing instruction in the orthodox view of authentic gcod takes the form of a historical treatise, lionizing the

[189] The first of these is Klong-chen Snying-thig, the collected revelations of 'Jigs-med Gling-pa. Second is bDud-jom Ling-pa's gcod treasures (ter-ma) which are compiled within the bDud-jom gTer-chos.
[190] gcod yul nyon mongs zhi byed kyi bka' gter bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar byin rlabs gter mtsho
[191] *rgyal sras lag len so bdun ma*

thirteenth century biographer of Ma-gcig Labs-gron, Brtson-'grus Seng-ge (1207-1278), who was responsible for purifying the embattled ritual.[192] Having addressed these influential persons of the nineteenth century let us look at on the most provocative accounts of aberrant gcod.

[192] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), fn. 76, pg. 335.

Khams-smyon: Constructing Aberrant Gcod

The nineteenth century witnessed an attempt to use the gcod ritual as an assertion of orthodoxy, defined against a heretical aberration. This was accomplished by focusing on soteriological aims of gcod practice, weaving a consistent narrative focusing attention on the ethical and philosophical principles associated with this rite. As the non-sectarian force of the Ris-med gathered momentum Tibetan scholars attempted to solidify the Indic roots of the practice and reaffirm its Buddhist values. Khams-smyon's historical account figures into this reformation minded conglomeration of various religious elements by identifying the negative counterpoint for orthodoxy. The history presents an unapologetically polemical description of so called "aberrant severance," *gcod-log*, which cites instances of sacrificial killing, the burning of blood offerings and even cannibalism. The heretic trope, which Khams-smyon liberally employs, is common to Buddhist literature, a device that is most efficacious for infusing various rituals, liturgies, or myths into Buddhist identity structures and subsequently condemning the source tradition so as to concretize the newly normalized religious identity.

Khams-smyon's history (*lo-rgyus*) of aberrant gcod, found within *The Dharma History of Pacifying and Severance,*[193] is most closely concerned with the specter of violent sacrifice associated with transgressive tantric rituals[194] and a need to distinguish the soteriological foundations of gcod from

[193] Zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi chos 'byung rin po che'i 'phreng ba thar pa'i rgyan
[194] Jacob Dalton, The Taming of Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 77-89.

unseemly rites of exorcism. Within the history, antinomian activities are ascribed to misled, arrogant individuals who had irreconcilably broken with the soteriological Buddhist vision. This salvific vision, which has commonly stood as the model for orthodoxy, expresses the authentic practice of gcod as a processual model of purificatory self-sacrifice by which the individual may come to a profound, direct realization of emptiness through severing all attachments and paying all karmic debt.[195] The move to reform various forms of heterodox ritualism to a normative Buddhist construct was emblematic of the Ris-med movement.[196]

The orthodox formulation of gcod articulated by Khams-smyon represents a variety of ritual reforms whereby the heretical other is called out as a counterpoint to a sanctioned Buddhist ritual order.[197] That other represents the danger of external ritual practice and helps Khams-smyon emphasize the necessity to internalize gcod as a ritual of Buddhist soteriology. In the case of our current text the other is represented by the character of Co Lab-sgron and her companion, the false Thop-pa Bhadra. These two heretical figures are said to have been practicing a variety of antinomian rites roughly fifty years after the time of Ma-gcig (b. 1055).[198] As such, Co Lab-sgron, although likely a fictional character, is yet another religious figure of eleventh century Tibet to share a moniker with

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[195] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 162-163.

[196] Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington: Smithsonian Institutional Press, 1993), 542-543.

[197] This process mirrors the introduction of Hindu *ganacakra* rituals into medieval Indian Buddhism (Davidson 2002, 318).

[198] Janet Gyatso, "The Gcod Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 335.

Ma-gcig Lab-sgron.[199] As the text will elaborate, the rituals associated with Co Lab-sgron include blood offerings, the burning of noxious substances, and other impure activities.

Sacrifice has commonly been a problematic obstacle for normative Buddhist practice because it is commonly employed for apotropaic usages. For sacrifice to be valid its function as a means of appeasement or exorcism must be disrupted. In the gcod ritual we find the elements of a self-sacrificial rite alive and well albeit masked by the inclinations of writers such as Khams-smyon to disavow all external acts of ritual violence. Khams-smyon's history of aberrant gcod although formulated upon a thirteenth century heresy is a warning to his contemporaries to adhere to genuine Buddhist teachings and thereby avoid the deterioration of the dharma in Tibet.

The Dharma History of Pacifying and Severance, excerpted below, was attributed by tradition to Ma-gcig Lab-sgron herself and, as we see from the text, the primary narration is written in her voice as a visionary account. This portion of the text focuses on a specific instance of ritual degeneration known as aberrant gcod, which according to Khams-smyon, came about shortly after the dissemination of Ma-gcig's gcod in Tibet. Within Khams-smyon's *History*, the boundaries of gcod are drawn by references to overtly antinomian practices. These practices are consequent of the hubris of the proponents of heretical traditions. The trope of degeneration necessitates reform and invokes the language of purification. We see in Khams-smyon's writing a concern that gcod may be mistakenly categorized by some as a heretical form of Buddhist practice for its usage of potentially antinomian practices. His fears are not mere paranoia after-all gcod had its critics going back to its early proliferation from those of a

[199] Erberto Lo Bue has written an article clarifying instances of confusion between Ma-gcig Lab-sgron and Ma-gcig Zha-ma, contemporaries who were both students of Pha Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas (Lo Bue 1992).

more conservative disposition, who accused the founders of gcod of incorporating heterodoxical, non-buddhist teachings.[200]

With gcod defined by authoritative voices within Tibetan Buddhism as originating in the tantras[201] and with its powerful sacrificial imagery, Khams-smyon is compelled to express the rite as clearly internal, soteriological, and exemplary of all the tradition Buddhist virtues. Hence the need to construct a heretical other to exemplify all that is non-Buddhist. This is exactly what Khams-smyon's text does, in the form of a prophetic record, narrated by Ma-gcig herself. Placing Ma-gcig at the center of the narrative account invests the *History* with greater authority and further making her address an account of a past life or visionary experience where she spoke directly with the Buddha grants the text significant legitimacy.

The central argument of the segment below is that "dark rituals" of various blood rites, including the sacrificial offering of human flesh are solely within the province of heretical foreigners. The text situates Khams-smyon as the destined reformer to such practices, giving him the authority to speak from the side of an 'authentic' gcod tradition, which is undergoing concretization at the very moment he is articulating its fundamental qualities. By the argument of the text one must assume that gcod is a practice, fundamentally Buddhist in nature, which can trace itself back to Śākyamuni himself.

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[200] Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 291.

[201] 'Gos Lo-tsa-ba, in *The Blue Annals* (*deb-thar sngon-po*), refers to gcod as *bdud-kyi gcod-yul* "Severance of Demons" of the *Prajñāpāramitā.* He also asserts on the authority of Maitri-pa (b. 1010), albeit anachronistically, that the gcod ritual is based on practices found in the *Hevajra-tantra* (Roerich 2007, 980).

Gcod, as Khams-smyon would have it, is a salvific performance to realize the absolute reality of emptiness and help one develop the great compassion necessary to liberate all beings.

> There are many ritual activities,[202] which harm sentient beings. For instance there is the aberrant gcod (*gcod log*) of Co Lab-sgron, her cycle [of teachings on] dark practices. Even though, Lord Rang-byung rDo-rjes (14th century) dispelled these aberrant teachings, like the sun burning away the clouds, we still have to describe them in some detail these days. [Aberrant gcod] is distinct from Ma-gcig's dharma system because it involves the consumption of human flesh, the burning of foul substances, the spreading of a dog skin on the ground,[203] bearing a copper trumpet,[204] and so forth.
>
> Here is the history of aberrant gcod, in Ma-gcig's own words:
>
> Listen carefully my son and all my disciples, aberrant teachings such as these will arise. Long ago, I resided in the presence of the Buddha accompanied by the seven goddesses, my companions from the sublime precious land of the gods. Together we gathered flowers and jeweled lotuses, and other wonderful substances and went to pay homage and make offerings to the Buddha, the Blessed One. I went to present my offerings; before the Blessed One I offered flowers and various oblations. Having bowed my head at his feet, I walked round him three times and sat down before him.
>
> The Blessed One spoke: "Goddess it is good that you have come. I will pass fully into nirvana and in future times it will be necessary for you to subdue the heretics at

[202] (*las tshogs,* apotropaic activities might relate to the *las zhig* of tantra)
[203] For the practitioner to sit upon.
[204] The traditional material is a human thighbone for its apotropaic qualities.

Bodhgaya (Rdo-rje Gdan).[205] Furthermore, it will be your lot to tame all the savage ones, human and non-human, in Tibet."[206] So the Buddha proclaimed, "This is the time to make an aspiration in accordance with these things."

[Under the full weight of his words] I became so discouraged I was not even able to make such an aspiration. So the elder, Subhuti, obtained the Buddha's blessing on my behalf. He bowed before the Blessed One and having taken a seat in front of him received his blessings. [Then] a bird alighted in front of us, a pigeon with a black [mark]. I took hold of it from where it sat. It clawed at my hand and at my head so I struck it on the beak with my finger and after a few moments it fell down, unconscious. Even to protect this simple bird [from its possession] I had put aside my offering.

Then Buddha prophesied, "You Goddess will be a subduer of heretics. In later times your teachings will become a beacon illuminating the harmful [teachings] of heretics [who are] akin to lesser [beings]. So because you have requested [the instructions] on non-arising so as to take hold of compassion, I tell you this, *the essence of the activity of dependent arising is not contained within the methods of non-arising but will come [in subsequent generations].* Because he appeared to look upon Subhuti [as he said all this] we remained with Subhuti, deep in thought, not saying a word.

Therefore [Ma-gcig continued] it has been said, "The collective of heretics will be severed [from the community] by the Lion. And for the reasons I have outlined, the mothers and sons [of the Dharma] are not able to reverse [aberrant teachings] at this

[205] Ma-gcig accomplished this in her past life as Don-'grub Bzang-po, staying in Bodhgaya for four years. He is said to have converted one hundred thousand heretics through debate (Harding 2003, 58). It is interesting that this section repeats the word "blessing" (*smon-lam*) over and over again and Don-'grub Bzang-po's birth name was Smon-lam Grub (Harding 2003, 57).

[206] Ma-gcig is reminded of this prophecy by the Buddha in a vision of Tārā (Harding 2003, 88).

time but, it is foretold that in the future a man named Seng-ge will reverse [wrong views]. Now, the Mahasiddha Chos-kyi Seng-ge will be preeminent from among my lineages and the very wonderful qualities of the one called Seng-ge will be four-fold.

(1) Whatever wrong views exist will be cleared away by his analysis of dependent origination. This refers to the purifying [qualities of] dependent origination [as taught] by Chos-kyi Seng-ge.

(2) Further, those practitioners of the lesser skill who wish to approach the secret ways of conduct must clear away wrong views. If [secret practices] are not concealed [from lesser practitioners], they may be harmed by immensely powerful heretics.[207] Because of such danger to [one's] life the supremely esoteric instructions, the highest teachings, must be concealed from lesser practitioners.

(3) Yet, activity like [the esoteric instructions] are necessary to purify wrong views step by step, like a spark that scorches a forest.

(4) Moreover, [Chos-kyi Seng-ge] will explain the way of arising that purifies the Dharma. It follows logically that the way to overcome inferior practices depends upon the transformation of idleness by willpower (*mu-stogs*) and once aberrant teachings are purified not even the slightest bit of harm can occur.

In ages past, the one who rose from the lotus with the secret marks, like a great king of Tibet, came to subdue the gods and demons. If you should ask, 'what are these marks?' They are the secret marks of dependent origination, which bring about the arrival of

[207] In a vision of Tārā, the goddess explains to Ma-gcig why the teachings must not be practiced by the masses and remain secret (Harding 2003, 88).

rDo-rje Gro-lod:[208] he who keeps a vigilant watch over gods and demons and causes the swift conversion of the perpetually suffering. It is just so, even Lord Padma must depend upon the aspects of dependent origination. So all of us, including Chos-kyi Seng-ge, declare our reliance on dependent origination. However, Chos-kyi Seng-ge [in particular] has been made protector of the teachings to avert any harm by the eight classes of gods and demons.[209]

From these eight classes [come] the very greatest and most powerful of heretics, whose heresies cannot be overcome without wise methods, it is essential therefore to employ skillful means. Even now, not far from this day, in the span of fifty years the emanation of heretical teachings will arise in forms both male and female. One [emanation] will be a boy, born in the country of India to a woman with no husband, unlike Ma-gcig [who had a father]. Further, the boy named Thod-pa Bhadra will come from a close lineage [of Ma-gcig], and will possess the sign of a black birthmark upon his forehead in the form of a barley stalk. A surpassingly arrogant person,[210] [the false] Thod-pa Bhadra will claim, "I am born of Thod-smyon bSam-grub."[211] Having practiced the gcod of Mahāmudrā, the wise, who have performed the final action which annihilates the poisons of appearance and existence say, *Degeneration is the result of practices such as burnt offerings of blood, poison, noxious substances, and various herbs.* Just so the great burning, the searing of human flesh, offerings of manure, and so forth, such an array of activities come from the country of Nepal.[212]

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[208] A wrathful form of Guru Rinpoche

[209] *lha srin sde brgyad:* Ma-gcig discusses the relevance of gods and demons and their meaning within the gcod system (Harding 2003, 123-133).

[210] Arrogance is a sign of a heretical practitioner (Harding 2003, 274).

[211] George N. Roerich, *The Blue Annals: Parts I & II* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007), 980-1005.

[212] Ma-gcig describes the various degenerations that will occur (Harding 2003, 277). Cannibalism is also referenced (Harding 2003; 276, 277)

The other [emanation] will be a girl, born to a woman of low esteem. She will hail from the rural town of bKra-zhes-pa in the country of the Black Mongols[213] (*Hor-nag*). Further, she will have a beautiful face and body, with pale white skin. As a mark upon her flesh she will bear on her forehead all the local deities in forms of a blood red hue. Her mother will say, "This is my daughter, the daughter of Zo-dor, whom I have named Co lab-sgron."

Therefore, all who bear the name 'Lab-sgron' are Tibetans. It is beyond debate that this young woman (the heretical Co lab-sgron) is beautiful. They will say of this girl, she glows like an indestructible beam of light, with her hair piled high upon her head she is dressed in an apron of white cotton over a bejeweled white dress. She is adorned with much ornamentation such as earrings of pure gold.

From her lips she will recite Phat! and claim 'I am the unborn one, Mother Lab-sgron.' A lineage originating in Nepal will be attributed to her and the following progression of events will unfold. Having arrived in Nepal she will meet Thod-pa Bhadra and proceed to the district of Tsang.[214] From there they will come to Lhasa and having gathered people by their polluted powers, they will establish their polluted [teachings]. These will be instructions in non-virtuous activity, the aberrant way (*log pa'i lam mi dge ba'i las la sbyor bar byed cing*). Furthermore, all my teachings will be distorted as [they] teach various activities to people in all manner of worldly positions. I know now that all these [people] will exclaim, 'O Mother Lab-sgron!'

[213] Hor; anthropologists have identified indigenous people of this Northern region of the Tibetan Plateau as dolichocephalic and likely they were ethnically Uighurs. Conflicts between the central Tibetans and the peoples of Hor are common throughout the medieval history of Tibet (Stein 1972, 31, 39, 47).
[214] A region of central Tibet.

This excerpted text provides extensive details on aberrant gcod and it appears that the formation of this heretical practice is laid exclusively at the feet of the female ascetic Co Lab-sgron and her consort, the false Thop-pa Bhadra. It is remarkable that Khams-smyon would construct these characters and localize them as contemporaries of Ma-gcig. Unpack this extensive quote. Just describe in your own words what the reader should take away from it. We may conclude from Khams-smyon's text that he was deeply concerned with the gcod ritual being interpreted literally and becoming a violent form of sacrifice. His hyperbolic language either served as a warning against threats to normative Buddhist values or as a device to move Tibetans away external applications of gcod. Either way external sacrifice is explicitly used to define heretical practice. The following are two examples from our source. The first, while somewhat less explicit is none-the-less emblematic of similar condemnations of tantric abuses through literalist applications:

> [Aberrant gcod] is distinct from Ma-gcig's dharma system because it involves the consumption of human flesh, the burning of foul substances, the spreading of a dog skin on the ground, bearing a copper trumpet, and so forth.

Khams-smyon clearly intends to portray Co Lab-sgron as a tantrika given the list of attributes associated with aberrant gcod. If we return to the *Hevajra Tantra* we find the following line:

"Then seated upon one's tiger skin, one should eat the 'spiced food' of the sacrament, enjoying

it, and one should eat with eagerness the 'kingly rice.'"[215] We know from tantric hermeneutics that "kingly rice" refers to human flesh and that such a sacrament was believed to give the one who consumed it exceptional power. "Spiced food" refers to a concoction of numerous forbidden substances intended to subvert the norms of purity instituted by the brahman caste in India. Khams-smyon, not surprisingly, is not concerned with constructing a motivation for Co Lab-sgron but rather in presenting general antinomian behaviors that must be opposed. The appearance of "dog skin" in the list of aberrations is probably a reference to a teaching of Ma-gcig as found in *Machik's Complete Explanation*, where she talks extensively of the polluted nature of dog skin and its unsuitability for the gcod rite.[216] The text continues with other performances that go against everything that gcod, and Buddhism as a whole, is supposed to resist.

> Degeneration is the result of practices such as burnt offerings of blood, poison, noxious substances, and various herbs. Just so the great burning, the searing of human flesh, offerings of manure, and so forth.

We can understand these lines as references to different types of sacrificial and apotropaic practices that employ the use of impure substances and antinomian means to accomplish the accrual of power for the person who practices them. This power may manifest as the ability to exorcise 'real' demons, control weather, or perform magical feats. Whatever the result in the mind of Buddhists such activities

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[215] David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 161.

[216] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 210-211.

go against the essential aim of spiritual discipline, the realization of the teachings on emptiness and gaining of merit for universal benefit.

Dalton's work on the Dunhuang manuscripts shows a parallel example of how language against sacrifice in particular entered the discourse of the nineteenth century. As we have already examined a portion of Dalton's analysis I will not return to it in detail. What his work suggests as well as that of several other ethnographic accounts, is that blood rites occurred in Tibet even to the twentieth century. There is no evidence that such rituals were widespread but they were obviously prevalent enough for Gar-gyi Dbang-phyug to write an entire treatise against their performance and for Khams-smyon to invent a fictive pair of Buddhist opponents who engage in such activity. In both cases we see the attempt to set an orthodox standard for Tibetan Buddhist ritual praxis, one that elevates soteriological principles over apotropaic usages and invokes the specter of cannibalism and blood rites.

Given that our present text appears to be the only historical evidence recording the existence of Co Lab-sgron and the heretical Thop-pa Bhadra it is impossible to say whether their appearance is a rhetorical device to convince wayward bands of Tibetans in the nineteenth century to return to the fold of orthodoxy or a genuine historical account. However, as I have previously indicated the former is highly probable. Co Lab-sgron provides Khams-smyon the ideal foil to warn readership about the extremes of amorality that may occur if one's activities transgress the teachings of tradition. As far as we know the only substantive descriptions of these two individuals are found here in this text. They are described as "heretical emanations" (*mu-stegs kyi sprul-pa*) of false teachings or aberrant dharma (*chos-log*). Therefore, they are heresy embodied. Their existence provides the dialectical tension necessary

for Khams-smyon to present an orthodox theory of the gcod rite. The phrasing used by Khams-smyon of an "emanation" is that much more forceful because it implies that there is a Manichean dynamic whereby true doctrine is aligned in opposition to the powerful, heretical other. The creation of Co Lab-sgron and the heretical Thop-pa Bhadra is no doubt a trope to cue us in to immanent degeneration that, by necessity, heralds dharmic reform. The passages concerning the origin of Co Lab-sgron connects us back to the early Buddhist sūtra literature where those who stand against Buddhist norms are describe as arrogant, haughty, and led by the desire for power and recognition rather than appropriate moral fortitude.

Ma-gcig similarly condemned gcod-pas who degenerated into self-serving practice and, taking the ritual manuals literally, chose to enact blood sacrifice for their own gain. She describes them as follows:

> They will wave human-skin banners pegged on poles, decorate their bodies with corpse cloth and dead hair, and carry human heads, legs, and hands. They will wear their hair loose without hats on their heads, and go barefoot without boots on their feet. They will declare themselves adepts. They will engage in vice and nonvirtue with their bodies and eat various unclean food. Proposing to practice equalizing all tastes, they'll eat human flesh, drink leprous brains, and suck diseased blood, pus, and urine.[217]

[217] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 277.

Ironically, most gcod practitioners to this day carry human legs in the form of the thighbone trumpet and human heads in their hand drums, which are not uncommonly constructed from human cranial bones.

The excerpted section of Khams-smyon's *History* establishes itself as a corrective text. As such its goal is to focus on gcod and by articulating a normative interpretation of the ritual, assert a standard of orthodoxy. The text demonstrates to us the fluid dimensions of orthodox boundaries, which are negotiated—at specific historical conjunctions—through tension in opposition. Positive articulations of such boundaries are expressed through affirming teachings on dependent origination, the centrality of doctrinal principles of emptiness, compassion, and non-arising, and allusions to hermeneutical instructions such as teachings of Mahāmudrā gcod. A clear example can be found in the description of Chos-kyi Seng-ge's four excellent qualities, his capacity for transmitting authentic teachings and adhering to the standards of religious orthodoxy. These four include his knowledge of dependent origination (*rten-'brel*) which, according to the text, purifies when it is properly expressed. The second and third qualities of his teachings are, that they have been sequestered away from the initiated and for that very reason will have a purifying effect when they are brought to light before those who are sufficiently developed along path of religious discipline. The text invokes the metaphor of a spark, which may burn through the forest of delusion. Implied in this analogy is that those who are insufficiently prepared to experience this purifying fire will burn away things of significant value, hence the generation of heretical teachings (*chos-log*). "If [secret practices] are not concealed [from lesser practitioners], they may be harmed by immensely powerful heretics." This view is

representational of warnings surrounding the entire collective of esoteric instructions, which are viewed as detrimental to the neophyte or the layman. Ma-gcig's biography records a similar admonition from the goddess Tāra.

> Those profound, crucial points of the Highest Secret Mantra that I have explained to you should not be propagated to the masses. Practice them in a hidden way, and make a one-to-one link. The few individuals who have the fortune will be matured and liberated by them.[218]

The full force of such esoteric teachings is essential to the practitioner of 'true' gcod for their capacity to eradicate heretical teachings. As such even greater authority is vested in those who may lay claim to possessing these teachings as part of a genuine lineage. As we have detailed already, the way to domesticate tantra is to construct a metaphorical structure by which antinomian rituals may be construed as elaborate devices for ontological metamorphosis. The concern for Khams-smyon is two-fold, sacrificial practices (burnt offerings, ritualized cannibalism) and heterodox viewpoints/attitudes. For the sake of maximum contrast Khams-smyon concludes his analysis of aberrant gcod with a statement of proper view that comes straight from the *Mahāyāna* textbook, "gCod is based on loving kindness and compassion, a mind intent upon enlightenment, the unification of emptiness with all the phenomena of

[218] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 88

samsara and nirvana, and selflessness."[219] This passage in the text gives notice to Khams-smyon's overriding concern, that gcod may itself be construed as an aberrant ritual, a sacrificial form of praxis beyond the pale of true dharma. This simple verse asserts the soteriological aims of the practice, disassociating it from external ritualism and rationalizing its goal as one of internal transformation.

Exacerbating Khams-smyon's concern for a proper interpretation of gcod, may have been the uncomfortable knowledge that Tibet did not represent a 'purely' Buddhist culture and that many Buddhist activities on a local level possessed an amalgam of pre-Buddhist ritual activity blended with more recognizable dharma practices.[220] It is clear, at the very least, that not all Tibetans were aware of the rigid restrictions against violent forms of sacrificial offering, but gradually such activities were absorbed into Buddhist practice and purged of their overtly destructive qualities. Tibetan culture, throughout its history, was well acquainted with rites of ransom that used animal and human victims within propitiatory sacrifices and these rituals, around the turn of the eleventh century, become duly Buddhicized so that the victim in question was no longer living but merely an effigy. Nonetheless even these performances do not constrain themselves to the salvific frameworks articulated by Khams-smyon and Kong-sprul but "were performed to protect individuals or a whole community from a wide range of misfortunes, including disease, drought, meager harvest, natural disasters, and attacks from

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[219] *gcod ni byams snying rje byang chub kyi sems dang 'khor 'das kyi chos thams cad stong zhing bdang med pa gnyis zung du 'jug pa gzhir bzhag*

[220] Jose I. Cabezon, ed., *Tibetan Ritual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 104-121.

evil spirits."[221] Therefore, the struggle to make gcod a strictly internal performance based on ideals of Buddhist liberation has consistently been at odds with the need for rituals that serve a certain apotropaic efficacy.

We have in this brief excerpt a prophetic establishment of religious authority and lineage. The text is drawn from an account of a visionary experience in which Ma-gcig was brought before the historical Buddha and was given the prophecy that through her Bodhgaya and the whole of Tibet would be cleansed of heretical teachings.[222] Central to any form of religious praxis which hovers about the borders of orthodoxy is the need to establish historical authenticity in relation to the points of highest doctrinal influence. In this instance we have two such points, (1) localizing the point of prophetic vision at the moment of interaction between the historical Buddha, the primary vector of authority within the tradition, and Ma-gcig the progenitor of the gcod tradition and (2) the establishment of the primary narrative voice in the figure of Ma-gcig herself. Both of these paragons of doctrinal agency are connected to the immediate present of the text by way of the prophecy, which extends the line of authority to Chos-kyi Seng-ge, the account's historical author.

Establishing the line of prophecy is necessary to solidify the works necessity as is the impending threat of degeneration. Decline is the fuel of the orthodox fire, only when the dharma is under threat is there need for renewal of the right and proper teachings, so Ma-gcig foretells, that the

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[221] Jose I. Cabezon, ed., *Tibetan Ritual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 108.

[222] This prophecy is also referenced in Ma-gcig's biography when Tāra proclaims, "As the Sage Śākyamuni himself predicted, the age of conflict will be your time to tame both humans and the nonhuman spirits in the Land of Snow." (Harding 2003, 88).

heretics Co lab-sgron and Thod-pa Bhadra "will come to Lhasa and having gathered people by their polluted powers, they will establish their polluted [teachings]. These will be instructions in non-virtuous activity, the aberrant way. Furthermore, all my teachings will be distorted as [they] teach various activities to people in all manner of worldly positions." The causes of going astray are subtle; individuals are overcome by their own arrogance, a theme we saw earlier in the Buddha's warnings against sacrificial practice. These false prophets then come to have great influence on common people, those not schooled in the complex hermeneutics of gcod.

Prophecy is not unique to the gcod tradition nor is it a phenomena of the nineteenth century. Ma-gcig's biography includes many sections of instruction in which she laments the decline of the scriptural tradition (*gzhung lugs*). "Because the authentic Buddhist teaching has less and less effectiveness as we approach the end of the Buddha's doctrine, it is difficult to tame sentient beings these days through the orthodox tradition of the authentic Buddhist teachings. It is like when a very fine and noble gentleman gets old and declines, loses his powers, and finally becomes meek."[223] Gcod in many ways is viewed as an antidote since it is "propitious for taming unruly sentient beings."[224] The excerpted section of Khams-smyon's text asserts itself in the same manner, a corrective prescription to reestablish the central Buddhist teachings, where they have waned, including the philosophical principles of emptiness, compassion, and dependent origination (especially emphasized by Khams-smyon). Gcod, as it came to be interpreted in the centuries after Ma-gcig, and perhaps in her own time,

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[223] Sarah Harding, trans., *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd, A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 109.
[224] Ibid.

was a sacrificial experience that conformed to the strict boundaries of orthodoxy and simultaneously functioned as a purgative instrument to cleanse Tibetan culture of heretical expressions such as various types of apotropaic rituals including human and animal sacrifice that clearly manifested throughout the country's history.

Conclusion

Sacrifice is a ritual by which Buddhist traditions have asserted an orthodox standard through affirming an internalized, systematized activity in direct opposition to antinomian external practices. Beginning to think about gcod as a ritual sacrifice will allow us to understand the complex and problematic dynamics that arise when Buddhists confront external ritual practices that contravene established principles of non-violence. It also seems that self-sacrifice is an area of flexibility, unlike other tantric liberation rites, which are unequivocally frowned upon unless they are used as metaphorical illustrations or performed in-effigy. Self-sacrifice has at times found a place within Buddhist tradition.

I have shown the usefulness in thinking of gcod as sacrificial ritual within Tibetan Buddhism. Now I would like to consider how these issues might be relevant in contemporary Tibetan society. At the same time sacrifice has played a dynamic role in the folklore that has influenced practitioners throughout the ages. Often gift-of-the-body tales have merely served to inspire awe in the dharma, but in certain case they have been taken as the model of action. Today, some fourteen centuries after the Chinese martyrs used these accounts as a platform to legitimate their own acts of self-sacrifice, China is witnessing an explosion of self-immolations.

Over thirty-five Tibetans have self-immolated in the past year in protest against the Chinese government's policies on the Tibetan plateau and more than seventy self-immolations have occurred in

the past three years.[225] Most recent reports suggest that at least fifteen suicides occurred in October 2012 alone.[226] While there appears to have been an escalation in the past two years, this rash of suicides is not merely a recent phenomenon. In 1998 Thubten Ngodup become the first Tibetan to set himself on fire as protest and many others have followed his example in the intervening years.

The response from Tibetan Buddhist religious authorities has been cautious. In November 2011, *The Guardian* reported that the seventeenth Karma-pa O-rgyan 'Phrin-las Rdo-rje had called for Tibetans to end all acts of self-immolation in protest. He qualified these remarks, saying that these self-sacrifices were performed "with pure motivation."[227] More recently, Ann Curry of NBC News interviewed the Dalai Lama and asked him of the implications of these acts. The Dalai Lama responded, "It is difficult to judge whether these kind of methods are right or wrong. They are expressing in a non-violent way regarding the Chinese policies [in Tibet]."[228] As two of the most senior religious figures in the whole of Tibetan Buddhism the responses of the Karmapa and Dalai Lama are very sensible. Beyond helping maintain Tibetan solidarity in the face of Chinese policies, the measured response of these two leaders leaves room for the actions of Tibetan martyrs to either be doctrinally exonerated (as in the case of Godhika) or potentially condoned as motivated by the bodhisattvic impulse to give selflessly for the benefit of others. The Karma-pa's comments on pure motivation and the Dalai Lama's measured

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[225] "NBC Interviews His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Self-immolation Tragedy in Tibet," accessed November 19, 2012 http://tibet.net/2012/10/23/nbc-interviews-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-on-self-immolation-tragedy-in-tibet/.

[226] "Tibet turmoil intensifies as Xi Jinping takes China's Reins," accessed November 19, 2012, http://asiancorrespondent.com/92151/tibet-turmoil-intensifies-as-xi-jinping-takes-chinas-reins/.

[227] "Karmapa urges Tibetan monks to stop self-immolation," The Guardian, accessed November 19, 2012 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/10/karmapa-lama-tibetan-monks-stop.

[228] "NBC Interviews His Holiness the Dalai Lama."

reticence leave room for either interpretation to be made in the future. As is always the case, an orthodox view will be asserted retrospectively. The question is, on what basis will an orthodox perspective be put forward? This is of course entirely speculative but relates to how Tibetan's frame the legitimacy of self-sacrifice and use sacrificial acts positively to support behavioral norms.

The most provocative instance of self-immolation—which garnered large-scale attention and also expressed an unambiguously religious motivation—was performed by a reincarnate lama (*sprul-sku*) from the region of 'Go-log. In 2009 Lama Sobha became the first sprul-sku to set himself on fire since the most recent rash of immolations began.[229] Lama Sobha took his life on January 8, 2012 and left a testament, describing his motivations in distinctly religious terms, claiming justification for his action on the ethical grounds of selfless generosity.

> To all the six million Tibetans, including those living in exile -- I am grateful to Pawo Thupten Ngodup [Tibetan exile Thubten Ngodup self-immolated in Delhi on April 27, 1998] and all other Tibetan heroes, who have sacrificed their lives for Tibet and for the reunification of the Tibetan people; though I am in my forties, until now I have not had the courage like them. But I have tried my best to teach all traditional fields of knowledge to others, including Buddhism.
>
> This is the 21st century, and this is the year in which so many Tibetan heroes have died. I am sacrificing my body both to stand in solidarity with them in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance through this highest tantric honor of offering one's body. This is not to seek personal fame or glory.

[229] "Harrowing images and last message of first Tibetan lama to self immolate," accessed November 19, 2012, http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/harrowing-images-and-last-message-tibet-first-lama-self-immolate.

> I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering, and to lead them – each of whom has been our mother in the past and yet has been led by ignorance to commit immoral acts – to the Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light. My offering of light is for all living beings, even as insignificant as lice and nits, to dispel their pain and to guide them to the state of enlightenment.
> I offer this sacrifice as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas. [Lama Sobha recites prayers of the Mandala Offering.]
>
> I am taking this action neither for myself nor to fulfill a personal desire nor to earn an honor. I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress [to stop her from eating her cubs]. All the Tibetan heroes who have sacrificed their lives with similar principles. But in practical terms, their lives seemingly ended with some sort of anger. Therefore, to guide their souls on the path to enlightenment, I offer prayers that may lead all of them to Buddhahood.[230]

Needless to say, these words connect Lama Sobha's actions to the early performances of the gift-of-the-body. They accord with the altruistic virtues expressed in the tales of the Hungry Tigress, King Śibi, and others. Lama Sobha gives his body "for all living beings." Consequently, even for the Chinese, who suffer from the same deluded ignorance as anyone else. A unique comment and one that deserves some reflection is Lama Sobha's statement that he is offering his body for the sake of "All the Tibetan heroes who have sacrificed their lives with similar principles. But in practical terms, their lives seemingly

[230] "First Tibetan lama to self immolate."

ended with some sort of anger." Therefore Lama Sobha's offering is on behalf of a number of Tibetans who self-immolated and were not prepared for such an action. Further, he clearly asserts his intention that through his sacrifice they will be ushered into Buddhahood (presumably through a pure land).

Many statements included in this testament resonate with historical accounts of the sacred gift of body donation as found within Tibetan Buddhism and South Asian Buddhism more broadly. These references help establish the authenticity of Lama Sobha's act, but in doing so it also suggests that he, like the Chinese martyrs before him, is claiming the agency of a bodhisattva, the one entity for whom such an act is condoned. What is less clear is the standing of all those many other individuals who have given their lives. Lama Sobha clearly intended his act to effectively pay the karmic debt of those who had died with less than perfect intentions.

Lama Sobha does assert the precedent of tantric liberation practice, a claim that is somewhat problematic, considering our current study. As we have seen Tibetan religious authorities have worked tirelessly over the centuries to internalize tantric activities involving ritual killing. Resolve and profound willpower cannot stand alone as a justification for taking life. The gcod ritual in point of fact shows that Tibetan Buddhism has a well-formulated practice to avoid external sacrificial acts, even acts of selfless sacrifice. If Tibetans understand to gcod as an efficacious ritual practice, why could Lama Sobha not spend his days giving feast offerings? This as we have seen in Mumford's[231] work is considered a highly effective way to pay the karmic debt of those that have died under unfortunate circumstances.

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[231] Stan R. Mumford, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 204-214.

The questions left in the wake of Lama Sobha's sacrifice must be left to hang in the air, but may prove a rich area for future study. As will the continued question of the place of sacrifice within Tibetan Buddhism. What is hopefully clear is that we can begin thinking of ways to use sacrifice as a conceptual model for explaining Buddhist responses to various historical events, ethical problematics, and the formulation of doctrinal norms. The perfect gift offering according to the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures is one without a giver, without a gift, and without a recipient. If this message seems paradoxical, that is because it is. Perhaps Tibetan Buddhist views on sacrifice are more straightforward. Yet they equally demand our attention and covet our fascination.

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